How do empirical approaches renew theology?

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Abstract:

Empirical methods in theology still represent a niche inside a massive orientation of predominantly hermeneutic, historical and normative styles. The question arising in other humanistic disciplines about how to integrate such new methods become more critical in theological development and demands more attention. Despite these difficulties, some recent appeals in Christian contexts invite to a greater engagement with sciences and disciplines usually external to theology; however, their integration and heuristic value is far from clear, since they question traditional borders and invite us to rethink categories and assumptions deeply rooted in standard theological elaboration. Resorting to some case studies that are examples of ongoing empirical research, this presentation will offer a glimpse on how theological boundaries can collapse to make place for a more open and fluid transdisciplinary space. Such a move posits nevertheless serious challenges, and pending questions should not be ignored when traditional methods become tested by the new ones, or when the normative stance in theology is confronted with the authority of data.

Many colleagues in our academic field look with suspicion and mistrust at the possible integration of empirical methods in standard theological research and its teaching. In most cases such fear is understandable: after all, the empirical approach has been almost completely absent along that discipline's history. Considering the key role that tradition plays in theological reflection, the resistance is reasonable against a novel approach not sufficiently tested and eventually threatening to disrupt a good deal of what has been built over the centuries with a huge and long effort. The distorting effect of the empirical approach is more than evident for those too used to producing theology by just studying traditional texts or digging in the interpretation of an assumed cannon. No surprise, hence, when many scholars feel threatened by such methods that could imply revisions of amply held readings or ideas, a confrontation with reality that could mean a hard test for freely elaborated notions, almost completely alien to any verification exercise or the call for evidence assessment.

Even in fields we label as 'practical theology', like pastoral, catechetics, or spirituality, empirical approaches are still mostly absent, and the practitioners in those areas, which could be seen as more akin to the empirical method, appear ~~as~~ quite reluctant to adopt its application, and uncertain about how they could be integrated into the curriculum and the way the specialists would make good use of the data and put them into the service of theological progress. It is indeed still disconcerting for a pastoralist in terms of what to do with data showing high levels of secularization in some area and affecting some population, like the youngest people.

In my opinion we are still quite far from convincing our academic communities about the meaning and value of empirical methods in theology, and possibly we are still far from a more mature development able to provide sound arguments, justification, and the richness of tested approaches available and very promising for the discipline's progress and credibility. Nevertheless, it is clear – at least for me – that such inclusion of empirical methods invites several deep changes in our ways of understanding and doing theology, a mentality shift and some reorganization in its development and formal appearance. The point is that to make a convincing case for an extended empirical application in theological work, we need to show that such approach can be useful, can complement traditional ways to produce theology, and can help to renew for good a discipline that appears to many as laggard and afflicted by too much self-referential models, isolation from other academic areas, and a speculative drive that appeared often as fruitless.

Surely, a theology that applies more consciously empirical methods will be a crossing-borders exercise. This clearly happens at the methodological level, where the boundaries between normative disciplines, social sciences and empirical sciences will easily blur. But it will happen at other levels, where contents are more into play: consider for instance confessional boundaries, whose arguments need to be reframed when placed into a more empirical – and less speculative – background; or the boundaries between systematic and practical theology; or between systematic and apologetics. In a more radical way, the boundaries between immanence and transcendence, between natural and supernatural need to be re-considered when the empirical reality becomes a *locus theologicus*, a revelatory space whose data become meaningful in our atempt to conceive the divine and its relationship with this world.

The point on the feasibility and convenience of empirical approaches in theology needs to be made reminding the new role played by scientific knowledge and its method, something new when considering the former theological tradition, and the legitimacy of a more 'empirical stance' even for a Christian informed worldview, a point that has been made by Bas van Fraassen (Yale U.P. 2002). Overcoming the resistance to the empirical approach and to empiricism is clearly a big challenge for a theology that is used to a very different mentality and cognitive framework. We can even speak about a 'broad bias' that renders the empirical approach strange to theological production and discourages students and researchers from assuming such methods. A pending task needs to be done to convince our colleagues about the positive application of those methods, which turn out very useful in several cases and can help to asses and settle different theological views, which need to be tested against the current data.

In this short presentation I would like to justify with examples and practical cases the application of empirical methods in theology. In doing so, I will show at the same time how the boundaries are trespassed, and new spaces arise in between old territories to allow for more transdisciplinary practices. This exercise obviously posits questions regarding the feasibility and limits that affect such practices, when it becomes convenient to re-establish some balance in that field and to keep a disciplinary authority inside theology as a normative practice.

In broad strokes I suggest to distinguish among five different strands or styles in the application of empirical methods in theology: the apologetic, aimed at showing the value of Christian faith in secularized environments; the practical use, which tries to verify or test the practical validity and feasibility of proposed theological models; the diagnostic use, that aims at reading the 'signs of times' and assisting in discernment tasks; the ecclesial-organizational, whose target is to better understand church institutions, their performances, possibilities and limits; and the moral application, aimed at better discernment of conflicting moral issues.

In all of these five orientations a similar dynamic emerges: boundaries are disrupted and easily crossed, inviting a more flexible view, and opening to new possibilities in the theological engagement with real living conditions, with real social entities, and with the factual dimensions of culture and shared imaginaries in our own time and conditions.

1. The apologetic use

Probably we could get the wrong impression from this first proposal: empirical data would help to easily build apologetic strategies aimed at showing the persistent value and utility of Christian faith, or religion in general. My point is rather different: empirical methods help to advance an apologetic programme in which the case for Christian faith appears as much more nuanced, less defensive or imposing its value over other secular means. This practice clearly show that we cannot develop a strong and hard apologetic discourse, following a model of contrast with the secular world, but needs to compose a more dialogical, open and collaborative model, beyond the temptation to trace separation lines or opposing the Christian worldview to the secular.

Take the case of *religious coping* studies, or *human flourishing* studies. Both can be adduced as providing quite nice data to support a Christian updated version; after all the data mostly show the moderate positive effect that religious faith and praxis plays in many coping areas. This point emerges too in the related branch of human flourishing studies, or the happiness studies, or even the studies on religion and prosocial behaviour: data seem to show the moderate positive effect that religious practice entails in many cases, helping to achieve a full and satisfying life. However, things are not so straightforward for anybody who is familiar with those studies and the data they provide. To start with, the healing and positive effect is by no means universal: some religious forms appear as dysfunctional or not-significant as studied variables. When religion reveals a positive effect, it is always moderate, never too robust or massive; the variances are rather low, even if significative, when comparing the religious subjects with the control groups. The results point rather to a 'modest' contribution of Christian faith; these data discourage a too eager use of such methods in order to build a theological case for the utility or positive effects of Christian faith in late modern societies.

These and many more cases invite reflection on how we can make sense of empirical data and their limits. In a first way, many things point to the impossibility to disentangle the religious and the secular when dealing with coping issues and the like. The outcomes often show that religious coping strategies work only in coordination or integrated into broad strategies that comprise secular therapeutic means, as those provided by standard medicine and psychotherapeutic praxis. No point trying to put in contrast the Christian and the secular. This is found in many studies in which the observed subjects resort to more coping strategies and do not separate or distinguish between realms. Something similar can be claimed regarding happiness and prosociality studies: it is very difficult to separate between the secular and the religious means, and everything reveals an entrenched set of circumstances, variables and factors that weight in such complex experiences, like feeling meaning or purpose in life, or when assuming a prosocial life orientation.

It is time to pay more attention in theology to all these data – which represent a huge mining resource and supply many interesting results – but at the same time to assume a critical stance – as the most appropriated when espousing an empirically inspired method. Indeed, theology invites us to pay more attention and to be more demanding with their use and application, sometimes too easy when these studies are applied to religion and draw consequences that are not warranted by the available data or their statistical relevance. Then a different issue concerns the observability of many religious processes. In my own experience the attempt to get empirical data regarding several religious practices simply distorts the observed phenomena, as happens in quantum physics. For example, trying to measure the efficiency of petitionary prayer – as has been tried many times – is clearly a wrong way that does not bring to any sure result. In an analogous way, we have learned after the replicability crisis that we cannot trust many empirical and experimental research in psychology when too many factors are involved, and this is still more patent in the case of studies that apply priming techniques. Assuming an empirical stance means in those cases to become aware about the limits that such approaches can represent and to assume a modest attitude, one which would be more helpful to produce a good and convincing apologetic.

2. Empirical methods to assess theological claims

This second point can appear as still more problematic, even if its promise is great. A good point to justify this use of an empirical theology is offered by George Lindbeck and his famous essay *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984). At the end of his book, Lindbeck proposes a quite intriguing way to solve issues in a very pluralistic and sometime chaotic theological field: “The ultimate test in this and other areas is performance. If a postliberal approach in the actual employment proves to be conceptually powerful and practically useful to the relevant communities, it will in time become standard” (*The Nature of Doctrine,* 134). This point is stimulating in its strong wager for a pragmatic strategy, one in which what really counts are the results, and less the rhetorical quality or the historical soundness. However, the problem arises concerning how to measure such ‘success’ or the ability of a theological program to convince and transform or revitalize Christian communities. It seems that the empirical work needs to be applied and focused towards that scope and helping to assess that positive effect.

There is another way on how the empirical stance becomes relevant for theological verification. An example will be helpful: consider the confessional dramatic clashes along centuries around how to better understand human condition: as failed and completely ruined, or as still signed by creatural grace. The same happens regarding the thorny issue of grace effects: is the minimalist understanding the right one, or should be assume a more optimistic stance, one that sees its great transforming effects? Catholics have gone through a bad set of experiences that invited to correct some views concerning sacramental grace. Troublesome cases of corruption invited to review a too optimistic stance and to assume a status of limitation or a greater realism when trying to understand human nature and its limits even when immersed in an atmosphere of sanctifying grace. Something similar has happen – but in other sense – with the studies on altruism, which invites us to revise some assumptions about the corrupted human nature after the fall, or the impossibility to do good works when in a sinful condition. The data clearly point in other direction and invite to revisit and change many established assumptions, and at the same time, to reframe the ecumenical discussion on sin, justification and grace. Here other boundaries are crossed or simply blurred.

The former reflections clearly open another field in which the empirical approach becomes very relevant: Christian soteriology, or the attempt to better understand how salvation is announced and lived in each historical context. In my opinion salvation should be a less abstract topic in standard theological production, and more a chapter inside an empirical theology aimed at better identify how salvation operates and become something that connects with a population needs and expectations, and how it is lived in a proximate way.

Taking an step forward, advances in the cognitive science of religion and belief studies allow for plural applications in the theology of faith, which could gain interesting insights, for example helping to better distinguish between intuitive and reflective religious forms and assisting in ways to 'de-bias' their negative expressions, or to better understand how faith is gained, stabilized and lost. In this case, developments in the scientific study of religion, partly acquired through empirical and experimental methods, allow to elaborate a theological approach beyond traditional boundaries and more open to connecting with believing processes that share many points with Christian faith and help to highlight – from outside – aspects hidden to a self-referential and inside-the-borders strategy.

The empirical method cannot be applied to all theological statements, but in a general and indirect sense, as in Lindbeck pragmatic proposal. However, in many cases, like those in which real processes can be observed, like anthropology, social entities or the natural cosmos, theology should be more careful when making claims that are not justified by observed facts. It would be clearly self-defeating to hold views whose evidence is scarce and even contrary to what is held.

3. Observing reality and discerning

The third field in which the empirical approach turns out very useful for traditional theological endeavour is the one known as 'reading the signs of time' and the corresponding exercise of discernment or assisting the right decision making when considering the relevant data or information. Even if this point appears as quite obvious, we are still far from assuming a theological model aimed at that role, able to assess available relevant data, and to provide useful information for those whose role is discerning and taking decisions.

A case of study is the way most churches deal with secularization processes in advanced societies, which deeply affect their own conditions. For those who have followed such huge religious crisis and its consequences, it is striking how theology has mostly taken almost everything wrong and has been unable to understand and to deal with such a big issue, because it was reluctant to directly observe reality and to account for data provided by sociology of religion trying to make sense of that epochal change. That failure can be described as one among the greatest and most embarrassing mistakes in contemporary theology, and one that presses more than anything else towards a better treatment of those data and the sciences that have been managing them to offer the best interpretations. It is a shame that even leading Christian sociologists have been ignored by mainstream theologians when trying to alert and advise about such damaging tendencies.

Again the use of empirical means when trying to better understand the intricate relationships between religious faith and secular culture is far from clear and straightforward; the available studies show the huge complexity that assume the presence of religion in those societies, the tensions between secularization and post-secularization, and the difficulty to understand those relationships in a linear way or a zero-sum model, as many voices have simplified from both sides: the religious and the secular.

The deep dissatisfaction with the current way theology has until recently dealt with secularization as a big challenge, should encourage a paradigm change, and a more open mentality. However, in this case too, a close observation of available data calls for more multi-level analysis and to transcend easy boundaries between what can be described as a religious and a secular realm: very often they appear entrenched and an abundance of versions in between populate our own socio-cultural milieus. No surprise when accounting for religious and spiritual forms becomes hard and has to include a spectrum of plural expressions, rendering the distinctions more difficult, even if necessary.

The other problem that emerges when observing the religious/spiritual realm from a theological point of view is the difficulty in assessing which forms appear as more convenient or better adapted or resistant in such secular environments. Indeed, the resilience of new devotional expressions without any care for cultural adaptation or sensitivity for scientific advancement, posits questions on what is really more or less 'adaptive' to that environment when religious beliefs are at stake. Even if pluralism and many adaptive solutions appear as quite plausible, an empirically informed theology has before a big task when trying to understand such processes of religious survival – despite the odds – and religious dynamics threatening with a slow extinction.

4. An empirical ecclesiology

The study of the Church is an obvious chapter in any empirically inspired theology, but again the state of research is quite discouraging: most theology has simply ignored the empirical dimension of Church structure or its social reality. Possibly suspicions and concerns arise because in that way we would do no longer theology but simply a sociology of religious institutions. Here lays the main issue at stake: the inability to assume data from empirical studies on institutions as an asset that could help to develop a better and more realistic ecclesiology, beyond easy idealizations or rhetorical excess in describing the excellence of that institution. Indeed, such a knowledge could help to better understand the possibilities and limits which are characteristic of every human organization, and to develop a theological view able to take into account such limits and to deal with them in a responsible and efficient way.

As a case that should help to think about the dangers derived from ignoring the empirical level, let's take all the problems associated with scandals, corruption and mis-management that have afflicted the Catholic Church – but not only – in the last twenty years. The study of organizational failure – which assumes a very empirical orientation – could contribute to better deal with such a huge problem and to tackle the many issues that arise when the churches simply do not work in the right way, their performance is suboptimal, and many lose faith on their capacity to deliver religious salvation or the goods that justify their existence. Obviously that knowledge will not solve those big problems and the challenges derived from that massive loss of credibility, but at least they can help to better understand why failures happen and how to better prevent and deal with them.

The proposed exercise in empirical ecclesiology clearly blurs some boundaries – theoretical and practical – and invites one to promote a big change in the way we understand the Church and design strategies aimed at accomplishing a program of steady reform. What needs to be reformed – when assuming the Augustinian motto *ecclesia semper reformanda*? Probably the way we can better conceive what needs to be improved or changed takes advantage from more empirically driven approaches, able to assess weakness and strengths in churches, after comparing between them and learning from their own failures and achievements. Such a program clearly connects with the pragmatic one proposed by Lyndbeck. But, furthermore, possibly we could learn from *quality control* and similar measures, usual in the secular realm of marketing studies and based on concrete praxis, to improve churches' as a complement to theological reflection.

5. An empirical moral theology?

Even if this proposal could nourish some scepticism – once more – the truth is that often moral theology has been built from an attentive observation of behaviours, dilemmas, and doubts, based in cases real or imagined. Moral development should be not alien to empirical study, especially after the wave of what has been called 'experimental philosophy' and how data from subjects facing moral dilemmas could help to solve some ethical conundrums. In that sense, moral comes close to a practical theology, and needs to test continually its own orientations, especially in hotly debated cases, in order to test them and to check their normative effect. Some dilemmas and hard choices can only be settled in the practice, and through empirical observation, a role that has been played in the past mostly in through history and historical experiences showing in the long run what was right and what was wrong when taking some difficult decisions.

However moral theology needs to keep its normative stance that should not be influenced by what are majority opinions and choices. Well, this is just a matter of contest: nobody can deny that moral values and views have deeply changed in most Christian Churches upon the last 50 years, and that in many cases, what was for a long time assumed as a grave or serious fault, has been later perceived at most as a symptom of personal weakness or of cultural bad influence. The empirical methods should help to better assess the extent of that changes and the influence that public perceptions and cultural frameworks play in how we discern about moral value or meaning.

The proposed approach is clearly problematic and not of easy application. The point is that – at least at the level of diagnoses – we should pay more attention to that empirical level, and to the available figures in order to propose a realistic moral guidance, one well informed about circumstances and consequences, about factors involved and means that help to cope with them. This means a plea for a moral theology less speculative and aprioristic, even if this means to introduce uncomfortable variables when trying to discern about moral valence and to apply the rules born from Christian values.

Concluding remarks

We are still far from a balanced integration of empirical methods into standard theological research, and the examples I have quoted are just reminders about the shortcomings and flaws that arise when the empirical dimension is neglected or dismissed by theologians; when theology becomes blind before the real world, the real people, the real history.

Possibly an explanation is to be found in a bad name that afflicted empirical theology in the past, especially in some cultural and academic areas in which that program was associated to extreme forms of liberal theology, and to approaches that could encourage – instead of deterring – secularizing processes or dynamics of internal secularization.

These problems need to be addressed and to that end it would be good to vindicate the therapeutic style that should characterize resorting to empirical methods in theology, and this at least in two different senses. The first one as an internal therapeutic process, able to heal theology from its rhetorical and idealistic excess, which has brought quite bad and disappointing results, rendering the entire enterprise less credible at the eyes of many colleagues in other disciplines. The empirical stance can assist theology in producing a soberer and to the point discourse, more careful about data and reality, and less prone to easy speculation or aprioristic positions.

The second therapeutic function for an empirically inspired theology is more external and follows the model that drives therapeutic sciences: once the standards of health are more or less settled, then the research efforts are led towards finding out how those standards can be reached and kept. This principle applies to theology as well: once established the standards of Christian life and beliefs – something perhaps more complex – then an empirical theology has to work to find out what contributes to reach those levels, and what prevents such positive dynamics. In that sense the empirical tools become very helpful when trying to diagnose current problems or pitfalls in Christian life, and to find out remedies or practices that could help to improve things and to live a healthier faith and hope.