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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.Sup31.14>

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

**Acta Theologica 2021**

Supp 31:233-248

**Date received:**

20 November 2020

**Date accepted:**

03 June 2021

**Date published:**

14 June 2021



Published by the UFS  
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

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# INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRAXIS IN EMPIRICAL MISSIOLOGY

## ABSTRACT

*Lectures on contextual theology rightly belong to the standard repertoire of academic training in missiology. While academic lectures on contextual theologies often focus on macro contexts or meso contexts, the concept of the lecture on context analysis at Ewersbach University of Applied Arts strives to focus on the micro context of missionary action. This lecture and the ensuing two-week internship "Missionary social space analysis" take place at the end of the BA programme. This concept leads to an investigation of a concrete micro context, using the methods of empirical social research and social space-oriented action research. The article aims to explore a theory-practice correlation in the training and application of empirical missiology as a practical science in cooperation with an actual local church. The article briefly presents the pedagogical model and the methodology behind this concept and then reflects critically, from a missiological perspective, on the prospects and limits of teaching practical science and action research in the academic setting of a University of Applied Science in Germany and beyond.*

## 1. CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIES AS THEORIES BASED ON OBSERVATIONS OF PRACTICE

This article explores the integration of theory and practice in empirical missiology. It first states that the root of all contextual theology lies in the

analysis of local culture and religious practice. For this purpose, it cites early approaches of contextual theologies, which essentially concentrated on macro contexts. The article then describes the development of contextual theologies for meso contexts and presents empirical missiology as a path to theologies of micro contexts in a case study.

Lectures on contextual theology are quite rightly part of the standard repertoire of academic training in missiology. It must be noted, primarily, that contextual theologies have nearly always developed from a concrete practice and a concrete context or from the observation and reflection thereof. Contextual theologies are thus theologies from practice.

Contextual theologies have become more widely known to a global theological public, especially since the 1960s and 1970s, and in response to the end of the West's colonial dominance in the world.

The early pioneers of contextual theology as well as the reception in well-known textbooks on contextual theology concentrated on very large areas (Beer 1995; Schreiter 1992; Bevans & Schroeder 2004; Wrogemann 2012). These contextual theologies initially represented different macro contexts such as African theology (Mbiti 1971; Oduyoye 1986), Asian theologies (Elwood 1976), or mission in a European context (Stowasser & Helm 2011). These essential foundational works of contextual theology can be critically questioned in terms of their presuppositions and necessary further developments, from the perspective of women, as for example liberation theologies, feminist theologies, and postcolonial theologies (Pears 2010).

## 2. PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AND MISSIOLOGY AS REFLECTION OF THE MESO CONTEXT

Approaches to the theological exploration of the meso context have developed in practical theology and missiology and, to some extent, in systematic theology. In my view, this is currently the main focus of contextual theological work, as shown in a number of publications in this field. After a phase of extensive, catchy, but also somewhat undifferentiated and monopolising drafts of the macro level, many actors of contextual theology have changed to this meso level. Examples of this are geographical limitations, when there is no longer talk of whole continents but of specific countries or ethnic groups, for example "Church and society in Poland and East-Germany" (Spieker 1995), or "Christian mission in South Africa" (Saayman 1991). In addition, there are different

focuses on a categorical context such as feminist theologies (Moltmann-Wendel 2008), or the theologies of migration and diaspora (Ludwig & Asamoah-Gyadu 2011).

I am convinced that, nowadays, a large part of the application-oriented research in practical theology and missiology takes place within this framework. In this instance, the needs of actors in churches, discourses in society, social science research results and theological work are often linked. The results are generally helpful for theological discourses in a particular area such as a country or region, or for a specific setting of pastoral work such as church planting in the big city. Since many academic theologians with relatively few resources face a variety of different contexts, it is legitimate to subsume different micro contexts such as individual neighbourhoods in different cities into a larger category such as church planting in the big city. Furthermore, such relative generalisations can also shape public and church discourses by, for example, publishing a monograph on such a topic. There are a few good reasons to pursue this kind of contextual theology.

### **3. INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRAXIS FOR THE MICRO CONTEXT**

With regard to the connection between theory and practice, however, the question arises as to how to overcome the still existing gap between theories and theologies for a specific meso context and the concrete practical work of a religious education, a local congregation, a diaconal district project, or a youth group. This challenge is not only a challenge for theology, but also for some areas of research. In the relationship between researchers in social space analysis and practitioners of social work, this tension can, accordingly, be proven by studies (Spatscheck & Wolf-Ostermann 2016:32). For the field of theology, I would like to present and reflect on the study units on context analysis at the Theologische Hochschule Ewersbach in Germany.

#### **3.1 The aims of an empirical missiology for the micro context**

At the Theologische Hochschule Ewersbach, we have tried to integrate this aspect into the training of pastors and missionaries. The goal is to create a bridge between the necessary and helpful contextual theologies of the macro and meso levels with the concrete local contexts of individual church actions (*kirchliche Handlungsvollzüge*).

The aim is to give students (building on their studies of theology, in general, and of mission studies, in particular) a methodically reflected and scientifically secured access to concrete practical contexts. Thus, the basic theological contents of studies must be related to a concrete micro context and the respective contextualisation must be practised. In doing so, two competencies, if possible, should be developed, namely the ability to methodically reflect on and differentiate the perception of different micro contexts such as a neighbourhood, a population group, or a social class in a town or village, and the ability to connect and implement theoretical and theological knowledge in reflected, theologically responsible action possibilities (*Handlungsmöglichkeiten*).

## 3.2 A course on context analysis as empirical missiology

The Theologische Hochschule Ewersbach is a university for applied sciences. Its courses of study in Protestant theology are especially designed for pastors or missionaries. In the first four semesters, students acquire the biblical languages and are introduced to all subjects of theology. In addition, introductions to religious studies, sociology, and cultural anthropology with interdisciplinary reference to missiology are offered.

This basic knowledge in different subjects and the methods learned – for example, the participant observation of cultural anthropology – is supplemented in the fifth semester with a focus on working in different micro contexts. In this instance, the emphasis is on the exploration and the missiological interpretation of a concrete social space. Parallel to the classical missiological seminar on “Contextual theologies of the present”, the course on context analysis practises the methodically reflected, independent analysis of a micro context, for example, a village or a neighbourhood. In the first few weeks, the lecture combines various aspects of missiology, practical theology, sociology, and social space analysis (*Sozialraumanalyse*). In the second half of the semester, the focus shifts to the fundamentals of empirical social research.

Students use the strongly application-oriented introductory textbook *Understanding the world – Context analysis as glasses for the local church* (Faix & Reimer 2012). The lecture supplements the practical aspects of the book, with the aim of especially enhancing the understanding of the sociological and missiological background of the approach. In addition to an introduction to the analysis of society by means of Sinus-Milieus – widely used in Germany – students are also introduced to the sociological background thereof in Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of society. An excursus

on the actor-network-theory of Bruno Latour underpins, for example, the pure application of a network analysis for a local community. Already in the first half of the semester, students practise the practical tools for context analysis, including a SWOT analysis, participant observation, and structured district visits (*strukturierte Stadtteilbegehungen*) that are combined with the element of listening prayer (*hörendes Gebet*). All of these exercises are carried out by students in a selected neighbourhood near the university and are reflected in the course sessions.

In the second half of the semester, an introduction to the basics of empirical research follows with a focus on qualitative research methods. Different forms of scientific interviews are introduced. In concrete terms, the method of expert interviews (Bogner *et al.* 2014; Kaiser 2014) with semi-standardised guidelines (*Experteninterviews mit halbstandardisiertem Leitfaden*) is applied. The students interview an expert on social space in pairs and transcribe the interview. With reference to the content-structuring qualitative text analysis (*inhaltlich-strukturierende qualitativen Inhaltsanalyse*), according to Kuckartz (2014), deductive upper categories and inductive subcategories are then formed for all interviews. In this way, the possibilities, needs and potential cooperation partners in the social space are worked out.

Finally, the semester discusses which possible approaches to holistic Christian witness can be identified in this social space and what possible first steps for church action would look like.

The course on context analysis introduces and practises the basics, the academic background, and the practice of social space analysis, with a specific focus on approaches of qualitative empirical research. For an internship between the bachelor's and the master's programmes, a social space analysis is prepared, together with a local church for its specific environment, within two weeks.

### 3.3 Social space analysis with a local church as a missionary internship

An annual two-week internship in the field of missiology takes place in cooperation with a local church in Germany or in other European countries. The supervisor of the Department of Missiology discusses the framework with the local church beforehand. Prior to the internship, the local church prepares a potential analysis for its own church.

During the two-week internship, the students apply the skills acquired in context analysis with the full-time and voluntary workers of the local church. The goal is to apply and enhance the acquired knowledge; utilise

the competencies in context analysis, and employ the theological skills at the end of the bachelor's degree in Protestant Theology in an actual field of action. The integration of untrained volunteers in the preparation of a context analysis is also tested.

First, the social space to be examined is determined together with the local church. This is usually in the village or neighbourhood in which the community is located. Subsequently, all available data on this social space are collected and evaluated in a secondary analysis (*Sekundäranalyse*).

Data collection is then essentially carried out using three methods, which can be expanded according to needs and resources. First, during a church service or other congregation meeting, information about the place and the local congregation is collected using the needle method (*Nadelmethode*) on a large map. Participants can place needles in predetermined colours on specific locations on the map for specific information. For example, one colour for the places they consider important social meeting places and another colour for places they consider important educational places in the social space. In addition to collecting information via the map, further information about certain places can be obtained in conversations with locals. Members of the local church are initially involved in the process.

A second essential method is the use of expert interviews by means of a semi-standardised guideline. In this instance, an explorative interview guideline for different aspects of the social space is created, with the aim to achieve diverse expert perspectives on the social space, by selecting experts from different fields. With roughly twenty expert interviews, comparatively deep insights into the fields of economy, education, social affairs, culture, religion, sport, migration and others can be gained. The interviews are then transcribed and evaluated using qualitative content analysis (*qualitative Inhaltsanalyse*) learned in the course. Besides the mere gathering of information, the contacts made with decision makers from the social sphere later help implement concrete projects with cooperation partners.

A third method tries to combine spiritual elements and sociological methods in an intradisciplinary approach. The students introduce the members of the local church to both the concept of listening prayer and the methodology of structured district visits. Mixed teams of students and members of the local congregation visit different parts of the social space, and essential observations and impressions are recorded. Both the impressions perceived as spiritual and those perceived as sociological are written down in a report and fed into the qualitative content analysis.

At the end of the internship, students carry out a qualitative content analysis, which is then combined with the results of the secondary analysis of the social space and the potential analysis of the local church. For this purpose, a research report is prepared, which is also available to the interviewed experts and potential cooperation partners. Furthermore, the group of students develop possible options for action for the local church in the social space. These can be theological matters as well as ideas for individual projects or perspectives for a missionary church development. The aim of this is to combine empirical research with the students' theological skills and to practise the integration of theory and practice in a real context. The developed options for action are presented either to the leading committees of the local congregation or to the entire congregation in a project presentation.

#### 4. LINKS TO OTHER SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSES AND THEORIES

The above case study of the course on context analysis and the corresponding internship at the Theological University of Ewersbach show the potential nature of an integration of theory and practice in the context of empirical missiology.

The many links to scientific discourses and theories of other disciplines are obvious. First, there are various overlaps with practical theology on missionary church development (Ebert & Pompe 2014), church planting and church growth theories (Keller 2015), and more empirically based church theory (*Kirchentheorie*). Especially in Germany, church theory has been one of the essential fields of discourse of new approaches in practical theology in the last decade (Hermelink 2011; Hauschildt & Pohl-Patalong 2013; Grethlein 2018). This often works on the basis of empirical – mostly quantitative – data such as the church membership studies of the Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (EKD). Church theories can thus, to some extent, be understood as interlocutors on the macro level for an empirical missiology with a focus on the micro context.

As far as social science research is concerned, one area explicitly deals with social space analyses (Schneider 2005; Urban & Weiser 2006; Spatscheck & Wolf-Ostermann 2016; Riege & Schubert 2019). The results of this research are often used for the planning of authorities, educational institutions and partly also for marketing. Various approaches and books on method are available. The focus on the common interest in empirical research in a concrete social space opens up new opportunities for missiology to cooperate and to engage in scientific exchange with

disciplines, with which it otherwise has hardly any contact. The same applies to the more general area of empirical social research. Certainly, missiology will be largely limited to the reception of empirical research methods of empirical social research. However, an attentive and critical reception and, where possible, an interdisciplinary dialogue can protect missiology from methodological dilettantism (*Methodendilettantismus*) with regard to empirical methods.

This concern connects empirical missiology with the wider field of empirical theology. This discipline attempts to integrate even empirical approaches to research into theological work and thus grasp expressions of lived faith empirically (Dinter *et al.* 2007; Ziebertz 2011). Empirical missiology is, thus, to be understood as part of the overarching field of empirical theology (Faix 2007).

Of course, an empirical missiology, using the example of contextual analysis, also provides a variety of points of contact to different other areas of missiological research. This concerns both the question of appropriate theories and examples of contextualisation of the gospel and concepts of Christian witness and interreligious encounter. All these and many other aspects discussed in missiology can, at least potentially, be found in a social space, and require a reflection by the local church, which is informed by theologies of mission.

In the German-speaking context, the course on transformation studies, with its associated book series *Transformationsstudien*, has done preliminary work on the connection of these approaches from practical theology, missiology, and sociology. The cooperation of researchers from all of the above-mentioned disciplines from South Africa and Germany has led to the development of a concept for linking the different disciplines. This resulted in more detailed approaches to the perception of urban contexts in Germany (Sommerfeld 2016) and an application-oriented book on *Context analysis as glasses for the local church* (Faix & Reimer 2012). The latter provides the framework for a more in-depth look at various aspects of social space. The book can serve as a workbook for local churches and as an introduction for students at Bachelor level. A desideratum so far represents a more academic presentation and justification of the approach of context analysis as a model of empirical missiology.

## **5. PROSPECTS AND LIMITATIONS OF CONTEXT ANALYSIS AS EMPIRICAL MISSIOLOGY**

The concrete and methodically secured study of a social space by students and local congregations polarises within both the academic and the church context. While some students experience the integration of theory and practice as beneficial and appropriate to a university of applied sciences, others criticise parts of the research – especially the participant observation – as unscientific. In congregations, the approach is experienced as either technical, mechanical and unspiritual, or as less evangelistic. Other members in churches experience contextual analysis as an eye opener and an important step towards a missionary witness in the local community that takes the needs and hopes of the local people seriously and connects them to the Gospel. Based on the previous experience of the programme and on academic reflection, the limits and opportunities of the programme are now identified.

### **5.1 Limitations of context analysis for the integration of theory and practice in missiology**

The course on context analysis and the approaches to context analysis by church congregations are largely based on methods of qualitative social research. In some contexts, even in churches, natural scientists and psychologists view these approaches as unscientific. Yet the current social science discourse on the opportunities and limitations of the qualitative and quantitative methods is not always perceived.

Apart from the classical topoi of missiology, no extensive introduction to the theory and methodology of quantitative and qualitative research can be given in a consecutive study of theology. As discussed earlier, in general, in the context of the “empirical turn” of practical theology, there is always the danger of method diletantism. This danger increases when one tries to involve as many people from the local church as possible, in as many steps as possible. This makes a lot of sense with regard to involvement, agency and sustainability of the social space orientation of the congregation, but it increases the lack of methodological certainty in the individual steps of the social space analysis.

A lower involvement of members of the local churches in the social space is not a sensible option. For a local church, a context analysis is only one step towards a contextual theological practice. If a congregation wants to orient its existence more towards its specific context consciously, then the process from first considerations, through the analysis of potential and the context analysis, to the implementation of concrete projects usually

takes approximately three years. Without the motivation and involvement of the members of the local congregations, that is, without ownership, it is not possible to maintain such a long period of time until the first successes are visible. If the local church itself is involved in the potential analysis and the context analysis, it can already perceive the success of the cognitive processes of this phase.

The experience from roughly a dozen projects over the past year shows that many of the processes fail, because project management and communication could not be designed successfully. It is difficult to go through such a complex process over several years with volunteers, who do not always persevere enough to go through the whole process of analysis, conception and implementation successfully. There is often a lack of competence in communication, project management and activation strategies. Newer approaches to organisational development, such as agile organisational development, could provide new impulses in this instance.

When members of a local church analyse a context, they are not neutral observers. They are themselves actors with self-interest in the context of the local church and usually also in the context of the social space. This is accompanied by certain assumptions and self-interests regarding the context and its analysis. Thus, specific power structures in congregations can hinder a meaningful analysis of the social space or lead to the fact that the results cannot be converted into contextual-theological options for action. In this instance, especially, the honest self-reflection of decision makers in local congregations is necessary, in order to become aware of assumptions about the social space and biographically as well as theologically shaped preferences in possible options for action. If this does not happen, a degree of prejudice about the context as well as a favoured church model is often reproduced in the context analysis. The context analysis then serves the supposedly scientific confirmation of one's own conviction.

## 5.2 Prospects of context analysis to integrate theory and practice in missiology

The implementation of this strongly practice-oriented concept obliges teachers and students to an intensive correlation of theory and theology to practice. Thus, the methodology of empirical social science is initially perceived as alien to a hermeneutic-oriented approach to theology. While this is very challenging for some students, others experience the methodology as enormously enriching. The methodically secured perception and reflection of one's own observations serves to form a

reflective personality beyond the concrete project. Beyond empirical missiology, this represents an important contribution to the training of pastoral core competencies. Charbonnier and Meyer (2013:239) rightly state:

Eine Vorbereitung auf Professionalität in diesen Feldern beinhaltet deshalb notwendigerweise die Fähigkeit, sich reflexiv und kritisch auf die eigene Praxis bzw. das eigene Praxisfeld beziehen zu können. Das gelingt nur, wenn im Ausbildungszusammenhang nicht nur Informationen über das Praxisfeld, sondern Kompetenzen zur eigenständigen methodischen Erschließung erworben werden. Der spezifische Gewinn dieser ‚Methodenkompetenz‘ besteht darin, sich selbst durch eine relative Distanznahme besser verstehen zu lernen. Es ist darum nicht unerheblich, dass im Theologiestudium gerade auch empirische Methoden als Methoden (exemplarisch) eingeführt, eingeübt und kritisch diskutiert werden, die sich prinzipiell auch für Rückfragen an die eigene Praxis eignen, ohne dass ein ‚förmliches Forschungsprojekt‘ initiiert werden muss.<sup>1</sup>

Empirical theology offers teachers and students the opportunity to gain insights into other sciences and their learning processes. This results in many opportunities for interdisciplinary connections between theology and other sciences that deal with the social space. This applies both at the level of institutional cooperation in the academic field and in the ability of students to connect with discourses in other academic fields.

With the practical exercises during the lectures and the subsequent two-week internship, the theological skills acquired in the Bachelor’s programme can be applied to local congregations. Students can also test the extent to which they are able to convey project goals and scientific methods to volunteers who have not been specifically trained.

Many local congregations show a great interest in adapting their own theology and actions more closely to the concrete conditions on the ground. Diaconal and evangelistic motives as well as the will to be perceived as an integral part of the social space as a minority church play

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1 Translation: A preparation for professionalism in these fields therefore necessarily includes the ability to be able to refer reflexively and critically to one’s own practice or field of practice. This can only be achieved if, in the training context, not only information about the field of practice is acquired but also skills for independent methodical development. The specific benefit of this “methodological competence” consists in learning to understand oneself better by taking a relative distance. It is therefore not insignificant that in the study of theology just also empirical methods are (exemplarily) introduced, practised and critically discussed as methods that are in principle also suitable for further inquiries to one’s own practice, without the need to initiate a “formal research project”.

a role. Many local congregations would like to conduct a context analysis in their social space, but they feel overwhelmed by the task. The course and the ensuing internship thus offer the participating local churches the added value of professionally accompanied context analysis with additional resources by the students. In return, the local church pays the costs for the internship, accommodation and meals for all participants.

In meetings with the local congregations, there are also spaces in which academic theology and its added value for local congregations can be experienced. In this way, existing prejudices on both sides can be reduced and mutual understanding can grow. Ideally, both sides experience themselves as relevant actors in a common missionary project.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

In conclusion, different theses on context analysis as an element of empirical missiology emerge from the above.

- Context analysis can integrate theory, theology and practice with one another in a concrete research and action context. It thus creates a possible framework for holistic thinking and action in a specific local context.
- Context analysis is highly connectable to various discourses within theology as well as in interdisciplinary fields. It can help liberate missiology from its academic niche existence and build bridges to relevant social discourses.
- Context analysis, as a field of theology of mission, has so far been hardly explored. The available literature consists essentially of transfer models of social science and ethnological models for church practice. There is a lack of both scientific evaluations of these models and fundamental considerations of the theory, methodology and theological location of a church context analysis.
- Context analysis enables relevant, application-oriented research in theology. It is particularly suitable in the context of the theological training centres of various free churches in Germany, which are state-recognised as universities of applied sciences. In addition, it creates space for cooperation between churches and theological science (for example, with these universities) and can thus contribute to a meeting at eye level.
- Context analysis is a missiological research and practice field that has a high demand for advice from the congregations, which

is only covered by very few actors in Germany. There is thus an opportunity to open up a field of research and application for missiology that is already in great demand.

- Context analysis must urgently be criticised and enriched by international perspectives and experiences of community-oriented approaches of contextual theologies. The experiences from other churches and theological contexts (for example, from the work of Latin American communities or from strongly contextualised congregations in West and South Africa) can provide valuable impulses for further development.

The concluding theses show that, besides the macro context and the meso context, the micro context also marks a relevant field for contextual theologies. Context analysis as part of empirical missiology is a suitable model for integrating theory and practice. It meets a comprehensive need and shows diverse possibilities for links to other theological and social discourses. However, a deeper critical examination of possible methods and fundamental theological approaches to this new field of empirical missiology is still necessary. The article shows first desiderata and approaches for this goal.

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Keywords

Empirical missiology

Micro context

Social space analysis

Contextual theology

Trefwoorde

Empiriese missiologie

Mikrokonteks

Sosiaal-ruimtelike analise

Kontekstuele teologie