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## Research Report

Elaine Graham

# Is Practical Theology a form of ‘Action Research’?

**Abstract:** In this paper, I will use the publication of a new book on what the authors term ‘theological action research’ to examine in depth the claim that practical theology ought to be regarded as a form of action research. Action research is founded on the indivisibility of value and action: a conviction that knowledge, and research, cannot be dispassionate and that values are themselves iterated in the process of their implementation in practice. It insists on the inductive and contextual nature of knowledge and assumes that knowledge comes from human experience (albeit interpreted and codified through rational enquiry and analysis), rather than proceeding deductively from revealed truth.

**Zusammenfassung:** Die Autorin nimmt die Neuerscheinung eines Buches über theologische Aktionsforschung zum Anlass, um die Behauptung zu untersuchen, dass praktische Theologie eine Form von Aktionsforschung sei. Aktionsforschung gründet sich auf die Unteilbarkeit von Werten und Handeln: eine Überzeugung, dass Wissen und Forschung nicht unvoreingenommen sein können und dass Werte selbst sich bei Anwendung im Handeln wandeln. Aktionsforschung besteht auf dem induktiven und kontextuellen Wesen von Wissen und nimmt an, dass Wissen aus menschlicher Erfahrung entspringe, statt es deduktiv aus offener Wahrheit abzuleiten. Praktische Theologen könnten eine Gemeinsamkeit mit Aktionsforschern in dem Bemühen um eine Forschung entdecken, die nicht nur das Verstehen einer Situation durch die Anwendung qualitativer Methoden anstrebt, sondern auch ihre Veränderung durch die Kultivierung theologisch verankerter praktischer Vernunft.

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The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is, to change it.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The publication of a new book on what the authors term “theological action research” (TAR)<sup>2</sup> presents the opportunity to examine in depth the claim that practical theology should be regarded as a form of action research. Action research is a form of engaged, participatory problem-solving research which seeks practical, often explicitly emancipatory, outcomes as its main objective. Its purposes “transcend mere knowledge generation to include personal and professional growth and organizational and community empowerment.”<sup>3</sup>

There are certainly many affinities between practical theology and action research, such as their shared rejection of deductive models in which universal theories or doctrines are ‘applied’ into real life situations, their common commitment to human flourishing and liberation, as well as an understanding of their respective fields as necessarily multi-disciplinary, eclectic and unsystematic, rather than a single discourse. In their own ways, practical theologians and action researchers regard themselves as inheritors of the philosophers of whom Karl Marx wrote, who sought not only to interpret (or investigate) the world, but to change it.

It is important to ask, however, what lies behind this seeming convergence of discourses, and whether the affinity between the two fields is more than superficial. The clue to this, I suspect, may lie in an ambivalence within both disciplines concerning the very purposes of research itself. Are action research and practical theology simply aiming at improvements in practice, such as enhanced competence or strategic change? Or do they reflect a more radical epistemology that sees ‘practice’ as disclosive of meaning, and an understanding of action as a legitimate source of knowledge about the world – and in the case of practical theology, about God in the world? According to this, the purpose of research is not limited to the generation of expertise, but transformed understandings and

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1 Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach XI* (1845), in: Friedrich Engels (ed.), *The German Ideology*, trans. Roy Pascal, cited in T. B. Bottomore / Maximilien Rubel (eds.), *Karl Marx. Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy*, Harmondsworth (Penguin) 1976, 84.

2 Helen Cameron / Deborah Bhatti / Catherine Duce / James Sweeney / Clare Watkins, *Talking about God in Practice. Theological Action Research and Practical Theology*, London (SCM Press) 2010.

3 Kathryn Herr / Gary L. Anderson, *The Action Research Dissertation. A Guide for Students and Faculty*, London (Sage) 2005, 1.

values which inform a new kind of practical wisdom. For practical theologians, this is expressed in an understanding of theological research as ‘talk about God’ not simply as a discourse concerned with propositional or abstract understanding of divine nature and being, but a discipline that facilitates a kind of dispositional understanding – an attentiveness – directed towards facilitating deeper participation in the life and practices of God in the world.

We will find an intriguing convergence, then, between action researchers and practical theologians in the way they both identify practical wisdom, or *phrónēsis*, as their desired outcome. For action researchers, this extends to a commitment to *reflexivity* within their research practice, by which the perspectives and self-understandings of the researcher themselves are subject to critical scrutiny as a primary source. This level of self-revelation is rare in most academic literature, even examples of research that aim to work collaboratively and sensitively with research subjects. Yet if practical theologians wish to add the tools of action research to their repertoire, they may have to address the question of whether it is appropriate to ‘leave themselves off the page’, or whether their own reflexivity within a given research context is necessary not only to understand the descriptive dynamics of a situation but as a form of *attentiveness* towards what Swinton and Mowat call “God’s redemptive practices”.<sup>4</sup>

## Principles of Action Research

Action research is a diverse field which extends across many disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, including health care, adult education, classroom research, management and leadership, industrial relations and community development. Action research is not so much a single discipline as “an *orientation toward* inquiry [...] and indeed a [sic] *orientation of* inquiry that seeks to create a quality of engagement, of curiosity, of question-posing through gathering evidence and testing practices.”<sup>5</sup>

A number of features characterise action research, which may be seen as defining many of its core methodological presumptions, as well as exemplifying its strong values base. Firstly, it regards itself as fundamentally problem-centred. Whilst action research practitioners will insist on the rigorous nature of their research-centred pursuits, they will also stress action research’s responsiveness

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<sup>4</sup> John Swinton / Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, London (SCM Press) 2006, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Reason / Hilary Bradbury (ed.), *Handbook of Action Research. Concise Edition*. London (Sage) 2005, xxi.

to real-world issues and its objective of generating knowledge and understanding that addresses perceived problems. "Action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives."<sup>6</sup>

Action research starts not from theory, then, but with a problem. It proceeds inductively from experience to reflection and thence to action. It embodies the principle of learning through doing, in which the skills of basic everyday problem-solving are transposed into a more structured, deliberative and transparent process: "[...] the basic action principle underpinning action research [...] involves identifying a problematic issue, imagining a possible solution, trying it out, evaluating it [...] and changing practice in the light of the evaluation. This is what many people do in numerous life situations."<sup>7</sup>

Action research also generally involves some kind of action-reflection cycle which will be familiar to those schooled in the educational cycle of David Kolb or the pastoral cycle of theologies of liberation. The process of action research is described in very concrete terms as a simple problem-solving investigation conducted by someone who asks themselves, "how do I improve my practice?"<sup>8</sup>

Action research thus has affinities with forms of grounded theory, which sees conceptual frameworks emerging inductively and heuristically out of hands-on enquiry; and forms of enquiry- or problem-based pedagogy, which argues that knowledge is pragmatic and strategic, and that the best form of learning is by doing. Theory (or any kind of distillation of concepts or framework of analysis) in action research does not aim at "the production of an objective body of knowledge that can be generalized to large populations. Instead, its purpose is to build collaboratively constructed descriptions and interpretations of events that enable groups of people to formulate mutually acceptable solutions to their problems."<sup>9</sup>

The second distinguishing quality of action research is that it is essentially a collaborative undertaking, aimed at fostering and building dialogue between different participants in any given context. Action research was developed as a means of enhancing professional or organizational effectiveness, and one of its core principles was to adopt an inductive, insider approach in which the latent expertise of those closest to the situation represented the most authentic understanding. Action research thus emphasises its approach as one of "organizational

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<sup>6</sup> Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research*, London (Sage) <sup>3</sup>2007, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Jean McNiff, *Action Research for Professional Development*, available at: <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/ar-booklet.asp> [accessed 19/05/11], 2.

<sup>8</sup> A. J. Whitehead, *Creating a Living Educational Theory from Questions of the Kind. 'How do I improve my practice?'*, in: *Cambridge Journal of Education* 19/1 (1989), 137–151.

<sup>9</sup> Stringer (n. 6), 189–190.

or community insiders doing research in their own settings or outsiders doing research that views insiders as full participants rather than as research subjects or informants.”<sup>10</sup>

In a complex, dynamic organization, it is believed that the best and most reliable data will come from the tacit knowledge of insiders, even though an outsider may help them to be more explicit or strategic about their tacit knowledge. Such an expert facilitator may bring generic skills to the organization, but these are put to work in very particular ways in order to facilitate change, wrought by greater understanding and shared commitment to identifying problems and enhancing the organization’s practical ‘intelligence’ in the management of complex systems. We cannot therefore separate the claims of action research to be a particular form of knowledge generation from its claims to promote and model a form of best practice via its collaborative and inductive style.

Thus, the collaborative relationships inherent in the research process are not only important because they respect the local or insider knowledge of participants; they are important as an anticipation of a participatory new social order. Action research promises “a different social organisation of knowledge management and knowledge generation”<sup>11</sup>, and conceives educational institutions and other public spaces as dialogical, communicative, value-laden: as organizations dedicated to the pursuit of both moral *and* intellectual formation.

It is this commitment to participatory, collaborative methods that sets action research apart from other fields of qualitative research, such as ethnography. That, and a refusal to separate ‘theory’ from ‘practice’. Action research locates itself in the context of a ‘post-positivist’ social science, drawing on postmodern epistemologies that privilege contextual, situated enquiry and the reflexivity of the researcher. There can be no absolute distance between researcher and researched, since all are partners in the generation of knowledge. Hence, “all participants in the research process should rightfully be called researchers insofar as they engage in deliberate processes of inquiry or investigation with the intent of extending their understanding of a situation or a problem.”<sup>12</sup> Action research is therefore strongly value-orientated, addressing issues to do with human flourishing and well-being, be they personal, corporate or ecological. In its commitment to participatory and collaborative research, for example, action research pledges itself to a range of investigative and representational models that will give a voice

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**10** Herr / Anderson (n. 3), xv.

**11** Olav Eikeland, Phronesis, Aristotle and Action Research, in: International Journal of Action Research 2/1 (2006), 5–53,48.

**12** Stringer (n. 6), xvi.

to those frequently under- or misrepresented by more formal empirical methods. As Stringer argues, a primary aim of action research “is to provide a place for the perspectives of people who have previously been marginalized from opportunities to develop and operate policies, programs, and services – perspectives often concealed by the products of a typical research process.”<sup>13</sup>

Action research also celebrates a diversity of ways of knowing, in keeping with its pragmatic, contextual basis. Here we encounter the third significant characteristic of action research: its insistence that the fruits of such problem-centred and practitioner-based enquiry are directed towards more than simply developing better strategies for change or technical competence. Certainly, there is a strong emphasis on the outcomes of action research and the completion of the action reflection cycle back into renewed practice. Nevertheless, action researchers also insist that action research transcends mere technique, towards perfecting qualities of autonomy, adaptability, intelligence and discernment such that a community or individual learns to internalise core skills of exploration, reflection and strategic planning. Reason and Bradbury’s account of this process could be rendered diagrammatically as a series of concentric circles, beginning with everyday practical utility and widening into further layers of personal, structural and cosmic transformation: “A primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives. A wider purpose of action research is to contribute through the practical knowledge to the increased well-being – economic, political, psychological, spiritual – of human persons and communities, and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part.”<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the terminology that best encompasses this dual focus of action research is of a form of investigative practice designed to build the resources of ‘social capital’ in its researchers. Action researchers are also adamant that they should not descend into a technical rationality of problem-solving in order to justify their existence. They consider action research itself to transcend the immediacy of practical problem-solving towards a more expansive vision of well-being and human flourishing in which autonomy, self-understanding and self-actualisation are the ultimate goals. “Problem questions seek solutions, ‘correct’ knowledge, effective procedures, winning strategies, calculative techniques, and ‘methods’ that get results. Action research that pursues a certain problem is completed when the problem is solved. Meaning questions, however, cannot be

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>14</sup> Reason / Bradbury (n. 5), 2.

‘solved’ and thus done away with. Meaning questions can only be better or more deeply understood so that, on the basis of this understanding, I may be able to act more thoughtfully and more tactfully in certain situations.”<sup>15</sup>

The outcome is thus as much to do with transformed consciousness, as practical efficacy. If practice is always already value-laden and value-directed activity, then the logical conclusion of action research is that it is not simply promoting greater technical efficiency, but cultivating in its participants a greater aptitude for action *and* reflection. As I shall argue later, this has powerful resonances with philosophical and spiritual traditions which stress the significance of reflection as a means for pursuing excellence, or cultivating a life of virtue – a life well-lived: “A useful way to think about action research is that it is a strategy to help you live in a way that you feel is a good way. It helps you live out the things you believe in, and it enables you to give good reasons every step of the way.”<sup>16</sup>

## Roots of action research

As befits a research methodology that prizes an eclectic and inclusive approach, action research has emerged out of a diversity of intellectual, educational and political trajectories. One thread emerged out of the discipline of industrial relations under Kurt Lewin and adopted a very problem-centred approach to organizational management. In reaction to the mechanistic, top-down methods of Taylorism, Lewin’s techniques emphasized the skills and local knowledge of workers and employees within an organization as bearing tacit, if un-theorized, understandings of organizational dynamics. The intention of such research was to improve workplace conditions and relations for its stakeholders. It took a communicative approach, believing that action research was a means to foster institutional dialogue and collaboration in which people’s own everyday practical wisdom was most effective at solving problems and fostering consensus.

Action research evidently also owes a considerable debt to Weber’s concept of *Verstehen* as the distinctive quality of the social, as opposed to the natural, world. Human actors work with meaning and value as constitutive of their social worlds, and thus the task of social (or sociological) inquiry and interpretation must engage with the subjectivity of social actors. Equally, to work for change

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<sup>15</sup> Max van Manen, Beyond Assumptions. Shifting the Limits of Action Research, in: Theory into Practice 29/3 (1990), 152–157,155.

<sup>16</sup> McNiff (n. 7), 1.



within a community or other institution necessitates a particular attentiveness to insider, or local knowledge, of the day-to-day assumptions that inform people's actions. Reality is not mechanistic, but subtle, complex and phenomenological in nature. Weber's classic study of the relationship between certain configurations of Protestant doctrine and economic behaviour illustrates perfectly how societies evolve not simply through the outworkings of inexorable material forces, but depend on the values, decisions and orientations of conscious, thinking (and believing) actors. So too with the epistemology of action research.

Another strong strand of action research has emerged from Freirean pedagogy, as exemplified by grass-roots literacy and community development agencies, often in the two-thirds world. Here, its practitioners truly believe that knowledge is power: but once again, it is the tacit know-how as embodied in ordinary participants' experience rather than the insights of high theory, formulated outside the situation and then transplanted into the context in question. Rather, local knowledge is valued, but the generation of further, critical understandings is also commended, since such a questioning, questing consciousness is what defines our very humanity and underpins our freedom as authors and free agents of history, rather than its objects. Hence, Freire's focus is on the tools of *literacy* not only as a practical or technical skill, but as a facility for autonomous thought and action intrinsic to human dignity.

Some action researchers such as John Heron choose to trace the roots of this humanistic and emancipatory strand in action research through humanistic psychology rather than Hegelian, Marxian or Freirean anthropology. Nevertheless, the commitment to the ultimate dignity of the human subject as author of their own destiny, in which "our ontological vocation is to become more fully human"<sup>17</sup> runs strongly throughout action research literature. Action research acknowledges the "moral intertwining"<sup>18</sup> of all participants. With that, goes the predominance of models of conscientization, inductive pedagogy and social transformation that are designed both to acknowledge and enhance human flourishing. Means and ends are a unity, embodying the values of empowerment, self-determination and participation.

A further strand of contemporary action research comes from pragmatist philosophy, which emphasizes the unity of theory and practice. The test of knowledge rests in practical efficacy, and derives from forms of pedagogy and research that begin from a problem-solving and enquiry-based perspective. Doing, rather than thinking (or at least abstract conceptualization) is the basis for reliable

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17 Herr / Anderson (n. 3), 16.

18 Stringer (n. 6), xvi.

knowledge about the world.<sup>19</sup> “All ways of knowing serve to support our skilful being-in-the-world from moment-to-moment-to-moment, our ability to act intelligently in the pursuit of worthwhile purposes.”<sup>20</sup>

Action research is fundamentally rooted in a social constructivist epistemology that sees people as builders and interpreters of meaning. Human actors are co-creators of meaning, and we act in the world on the basis of our own meaning-making, which is what undergirds collective and individual action. “[...] our world does not consist of separate things but of relationships which we co-author. We participate in our world, so that the ‘reality’ we experience is a co-creation that involves the primal givenness of the cosmos and human feeling and constructing.”<sup>21</sup>

Once again, we can discern the affinity here between action research and forms of qualitative and interpretative social science which stress the centrality of *Verstehen*, or ‘understanding’ at the heart of its methodology. Action researchers thus adopt research methods and strategies of interpretation that enable the researcher and researched alike to reach a deeper understanding of the meanings implicit in practice. “Both thinking and acting are forms of conduct that are meaningful in themselves. It is not so that thinking provides the aims or objectives and that action is the causal or rational application of that thinking. Human beings are purposefully or meaningfully oriented in reflective as well as active behavior.”<sup>22</sup>

Action research inevitably involves one in declaring one’s own values and beliefs. The ‘reflexive turn’ in much social science refuses any model of knowledge production that separates ‘knower’ from ‘known’. It is impossible for the action researcher, in the words of Herr and Anderson, “to leave themselves off the page”.<sup>23</sup> This results in a reflexive approach to research in which the agendas and assumptions of actors themselves are not ‘bracketed out’ of the equation but taken to be the substance of the life-world, as lived experience, that is under scrutiny. Crucially, then, whilst other forms of participant-observation may seek to enter the worlds of its informants, the distinction between researcher and researched is still maintained, and it is clear where the authorship or the copyright of the thesis in ethnography or congregational studies rests. With action research, however, the role of researcher is closer to that of facilitator, consultant or co-author.

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<sup>19</sup> Reason / Bradbury (n. 5), xxv.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> van Manen (n. 15), 156.

<sup>23</sup> Herr / Anderson (n. 3), 69.

## 'Me', 'Us' and 'Them'

Second person action research defines a more collaborative enterprise, in addressing matters of shared concern. Once again, however, means and ends are indivisible. Reason and Bradbury refer to the significance of building "communities of inquiry"<sup>24</sup> in which relationships and modes of collaboration are valued as outcomes, as much as substantive change within a particular organization or context. Third person research may refer to larger or more complex organisational relationships, or involve the researcher as participant in communities other than their own; but there is still a focus on capacity-building or the enhancement of social capital within an organization. In other words, action research inquiry may be aimed at achieving particular changes in relation to an organization's relationships with the external world; but it also values internal goods, such as a greater facility to learn and to adapt in the face of change.

Herr and Anderson prefer to describe first, second and third person research in terms of a continuum of "positionality".<sup>25</sup> This denotes a range of possible configurations of insider and outsider status, with concomitant implications for the nature of relationships within teams and the possible outcomes of research inquiry. These range from the insider as researching themselves to the more conventional undertakings of consultant or ethnographer, familiar from mainstream academic research.

Insider studies own practice and/or subjectivity	Practitioner research Autoethnography
Insider in collaboration with other insiders	Self-help groups Collaborative research teams
Insider in collaboration with outsiders	Study groups
Reciprocal insider-outsider participant action research	Collaborative participant action research
Outsider collaborating with or facilitating insider enquiry	Consultancy Focus groups
Researcher as outsider studying insiders	Ethnography Academic qualitative research

(Adapted from Herr/Anderson, 211).

<sup>24</sup> Reason / Bradbury (n. 5), xxvi.

<sup>25</sup> Herr / Anderson (n. 3), 31–48.

## Practical Theology as ‘Action Research’

The emerging interest in action research amongst practical theologians takes place in the context of developments in the discipline over the past thirty years. These have seen a move away from an exclusive emphasis on clergy education towards a more broadly-based focus on adult lay theological formation, influenced by traditions of orthopraxis and virtue ethics which locate theological discourse as quintessentially practical. Theology, as ‘talk about God’ is always already oriented towards the cultivation of faithful discipleship. As a contextual theology, practical theology aims to understand how theology is mediated through human language and culture. These have their parallels with similar movements characteristic of action research: of inductive, standpoint epistemologies that value the common sense of informants and participants; of the pragmatic turn in philosophy; of the eschewal of ‘ivory tower’ forms of knowledge generation.

Mention of the potential affinity between practical theology and action research – at least, in the English-speaking context<sup>26</sup> – first came to prominence following through John Swinton and Harriet Mowat’s “Practical Theology and Qualitative Research”. In writing the book, Swinton and Mowat’s intention was to provide a set of qualitative research tools that could enable greater understanding and analysis of practical examples of faith-in-action. Qualitative research entails an emphasis on the construction of the social world and the processes of human meaning-making. Epistemologically, it deals with ‘ideographic’ rather than ‘nomothetic’ knowledge: on interpreting situations that cannot be replicated under scientific conditions, thereby producing conclusions that can be generalizable beyond their original context. As I have argued, this has close affinities with constructivist traditions of action research, which emphasise the specific and contextual nature of qualitative methodology, and which stress the importance of *Verstehen*, or the meanings and world-views brought to a social situation by human actors. This in turn relates to elements of qualitative research which value ‘insider’ knowledge or reflexivity of actors in a situation – broadly adopting a

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**26** In Francophone countries, action research is already well-established within practical theology. See, for example: Marcel Viau, *L’intervention Socio-Pastorale, un Instrument de Recherche-Action pour le Milieu Populaire* [Ph.D. Thesis], Montreal (Université de Montréal) 1983; Solange Lefebvre, *Perspectives fondamentales et recherche-action*, in: Bernard Reymond / Jean-Michel Sordet (ed.), *La théologie pratique. Statut, méthodes, perspectives d’avenir*, Paris (Beauchesne) 1993, 201–210; Isabelle Grellier, *Les démarches de la théologie pratique*, in: Bernard Kaempf (ed.), *Introduction à la théologie pratique*, Strasbourg (Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg) 1997, 41–59.

social constructivist epistemology in which human beings create the reality of the thought-world in which they act.

According to Swinton and Mowat, "Practical Theology has a particular focus on specific situations"<sup>27</sup>, but only with a view to effecting critical understanding and transformation, for "the Practical Theologian seeks to ensure faithful practice and authentic human living in the light of scripture and tradition."<sup>28</sup> As well as facilitating 'thick descriptions' of practice, therefore, the authors insist they are engaged in theological interpretation as well, since practices are always value-laden, purposeful activities that are embedded in particular ways of life, informed by and pointing to the 'redemptive' activity of God.

Practical Theology exists at the interface between "the script of revelation given to us in Christ" and the ongoing 'performance' of the Church "as they interact with the practices of the world".<sup>29</sup> It is "dedicated to enabling the faithful performance of the gospel and to exploring and taking seriously the complex dynamics of the human encounter with God".<sup>30</sup> In other words, faith is something to be practised and not just believed; and one of the tasks of practical theological research is to investigate and interpret the lived experience of people of faith in order to facilitate and deepen their "faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world"<sup>31</sup>.

"Practical Theology and Qualitative Research" contains five substantial case studies, involving hospital chaplaincy, pastoral counselling and disability. In the light of earlier discussions about conducting a piece of collaborative qualitative research in which a group of people with disabilities became, through processes of consultation, co-researchers in a project, Swinton and Mowat argue that practical theology is "fundamentally *action* research".<sup>32</sup> They continue, "In qualitative research settings this is a method of enquiry and practice which encourages controlled and focused change using the knowledge and expertise of those involved in the research setting [...] In Practical Theology it can be understood to be a framework of enquiry which is driven by the desire to create the circumstances for transformative action that not only seeks after truth and knowledge, but also offers the possibility of radical transformation and challenging new modes of faithfulness."<sup>33</sup>

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27 Swinton and Mowat (n. 4), v.

28 Ibid., vi.

29 Ibid., 4.

30 Ibid., 6.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 255.

33 Ibid., x.

When Swinton and Mowat refer to ‘challenging new modes of faithfulness’, however, are they implying that experience and reflection on practice, particularly that informed by the critical lenses of action research, may also be a source of theological understanding as well? Despite their language of faith as ‘performative’, Swinton and Mowat reveal a degree of ambivalence over the capacity of practice to reshape received tradition. On the one hand, they argue that the “primary task of Practical Theology is not simply to see differently, but to enable that revised vision to create changes in the way that Christians and Christian communities perform the faith.”<sup>34</sup> However, this is not a postmodern or post-foundational understanding of theology as performative,<sup>35</sup> but reflects a broadly Barthian insistence on “the priority of theology, rooted in the givenness of God’s revelation”<sup>36</sup>. There remains a clear distinction, therefore, between the “script of revelation”<sup>37</sup> – even though its enactment is ‘performative and embodied’ – and human experience as a source of revelation. Despite their commitment to research on and into practice, it appears that, as a human artefact, it does not count as revelation. “Experience and human reason cannot lead us [...] to an understanding of the cross and the resurrection.”<sup>38</sup> However, this allows no possibility for those who have experienced violence at the hands of another reaching a new apprehension of Christ’s Passion; for those who have accompanied someone in the final stages of their lives discovering new insights into death and dying; for those who struggle for human dignity in the face of oppression to embody a powerful testimony to the reality of the resurrection.

Yet a piece of theological action research might generate very novel forms of spirituality, or conclude that traditional ways of imaging God are in need of fundamental revision. This is a theological question, of how experience engenders new understandings, and how to understand the nature of revelation: how do we know what we claim to know about the world in order to act meaningfully within it; and what is truth and where does authority of revelation lie? If revelation is the ‘script’ and practice is the performance, Swinton and Mowat offer little scope for improvisation or revision. This falls some way short of the radical

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>35</sup> Such as Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice. Pastoral Theology in an age of uncertainty*, Eugene (Wipf and Stock) <sup>2</sup>2002.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Todd, *Review of Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, in: *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 4/2 (2007), 218–219, 218.

<sup>37</sup> Swinton / Mowat (n. 4), 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

epistemology of action research, in which 'practice' is not simply a matter of technique but a source of meaning and disclosure.<sup>39</sup>

## Talking about God in Practice

Swinton and Mowat's model of revelation may be open to question, but their insistence on the practical theologian as action researcher, one who facilitates reflection and understanding in order to see its practical and transformative outworkings, does represent a valuable insight. This has now been elaborated further, with the publication of what is arguably the first extended treatment of practical theology and action research. "Talking about God in Practice", published in 2010, is itself the result of collaboration between a number of Anglicans and Roman Catholics involved in theological education and community development.<sup>40</sup>

In this volume, we see a number of critical features that were implicit but underdeveloped in Swinton and Mowat's treatment: an emphasis on theology as practised; on the task of practical theological research as interpretation of the lived experience of faith in action; and the fusion of qualitative investigation and theological education, in its commitment not simply to record participants' experiences of faith practices, but to facilitate greater effectiveness and in the process to raise people's theological understanding in the pursuit of practical wisdom.

It is interesting to note that just as Swinton and Mowat begin by connecting practical theological research with the *missio Dei* – the facilitation of 'faithful participation in God's redemptive practices' – so too the authors of "Talking about God in Practice" locate their core research problem as missiological. "Theological Action Research is a partnership between an insider and an outsider team to undertake research and conversations answering theological questions about faithful practice in order to renew both theology and practice in the service of God's mission."<sup>41</sup> They are concerned with the loss of credibility of the churches in contemporary European culture, due to the challenges of continuing secularization. Western civilizations such as the UK see no sign of the slowing, let alone reversal, of decline in organized Christianity, and it is against this backdrop of increasing marginalization of religion and religious discourse, and the poor

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39 Ibid., 17.

40 Cameron et al. (n. 2).

41 Ibid., 63.

image of academic theology as irrelevant to the concerns of the vast majority of citizens, that the project was conducted.

In spite of institutional decline, however, one of the ways in which the largest denominations in the UK – the Churches of England and Scotland (both of which are of course still ‘established’ by law) and the Roman Catholic church – still punch above their weight in significant measure is their prominence in the promotion and delivery of various forms of welfare provision: faith schools, community partnerships, care of the elderly and fostering and adoption agencies. Church buildings, often holding dwindling numbers of congregants on Sundays, are still well-used during the week to host a range of community activities. So it is often the practical involvement of a church – even if that is more apparent in the shape of physical rather than human capital – that maintains its public visibility and practical impact. With government spending cuts leading to the closure of many publicly-funded and subsidized ventures, the role of the community and voluntary sector – of which the Christian churches are still the largest and most ubiquitous – continues to play a significant role in the lives of citizens, especially those most in need.

This sociological and missiological context may help to explain why the authors see this kind of engagement as at the vanguard of the churches’ engagement with secular society. When Christian discourse and doctrine is increasingly alien to people’s experience, it is the Church’s practical ministry that serves to maintain anything like a vibrant presence in society. In these circumstances, however, it would be easy simply to get absorbed into the practical provision of services and to lose any distinctively Christian identity. This is particularly acute in situations where local churches have to decide whether to collaborate with secular agencies or to seek statutory funding, if that may mean a drift or even surrender of their core values in the Gospel.

It is interesting, therefore, that this study book on practical theology has its beginnings in questions of mission, like Swinton and Mowat, but also that it regards practical theological research as, potentially, a tool for Christian apologetics as well. The challenges are certainly practical and strategic, but the authors regard them as firmly theological too, since in order for the Church not to be compromised by the pressures of decline it must be capable of distinguishing “the practices of faith from the clutches of the cultural forms that would keep faith under cover”<sup>42</sup>. The Church’s mission to contemporary society is conducted via its practical expressions of concern for the welfare of the surrounding community, regardless of the latter’s profession of faith, largely because such care is a

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.



manifestation of 'the deep connectedness of the Christian theological tradition and human experience' – what might be termed 'common grace'. It is precisely the 'performative speech acts' of such activism that upholds this connection, and which reveals the true purpose of the Church, to underwrite human well-being and seek God's will in the service of others. Practices are bearers of 'living Christian tradition' which evolves in dialogue with contemporary experience. Such practical wisdom is understood as "a part of the ongoing dynamic of God's revealing life"<sup>43</sup>. Practice and experience are thus always already theological.

Yet such action needs safeguarding, in two ways. Firstly, in order to be authentically Christian and not captive to values that might compromise the Gospel, such community engagement must be theologically coherent and grounded – what Cameron *et al* term the 'operant' theology, or the way in which action 'performatively' speaks of God. Secondly, as a corollary, the Church must foster a theological fluency or literacy in its practitioners. Thus the missionary or apologetic task becomes one of theological formation and reflection. This, then, is where practical theology comes in: "to make practice more theological – and in that way it makes theology more practical."<sup>44</sup>

This book stands in a tradition of practical theological reasoning, therefore, which regards theology as a 'performative' discipline and the task of practical theology itself as facilitating a creative dialogue between tradition and experience, theology and practice: "Practical theology is a discipline committed to making whole and dynamic the truthfulness of Christian thought and action, through the bringing together of aspects of faith which, in truth, can never be separated from one another."<sup>45</sup> It aims thus at formation and transformation: at the improvement of practical efficacy, but also at greater theological fluency. Theological action research is about growing in faith and discerning the presence of God in the midst of practical engagement. Best practice and theological reflection are, thus, indivisible – and TAR counters accusations that the Church's involvement in community is a distraction from its true calling to preach the Gospel and reveal God to the world, by upholding its calling to 'speak of' the God who is the source of all things at work in the practices of human liberation and community enhancement – only performatively, in the actions and embodied values of faith. "Practical theology names practice – with all its specificity and limitation – as *the* place of encounter with the infinite mystery of God, *the* place of

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43 *Ibid.*, 52.

44 *Ibid.*, 17.

45 *Ibid.*, 20–21.

grace; the Christian practitioner is thus compelled to seek out and speak the language of God within definite human contexts.”<sup>46</sup>

Action research’s integration of problem-solving and self-directed transformation has already been noted, and details of the projects carried out by Cameron and her team show evidence of strong learning amongst participants. They describe three different projects, ranging from a local Anglican parish to a Roman Catholic diocese and a faith-based non-governmental agency. All projects are self-evidently successful in stimulating a deeper quality of theological reflection amongst participants, demonstrating how experience can give rise to new understandings of the nature of God-talk and of God’s activities in the world. Whilst it holds great potential as a method for adult theological education, however, it remains focused on organizational change, with the collaboration between researchers and participants framed more in terms of action research as consultancy, and fails to address the ‘positionality’ of Cameron and her team, who remain resolutely ‘off the page’ in terms of any declaration or exploration of their own reflexivity. Such an approach may thus have a greater continuity with extant traditions of qualitative research in practical theology such as ethnography and congregational studies, without fully attending to the radical impact of first person action research on the discipline.

## Practical Theology *as* Action Research

In this next section, I will take some representative texts from the past thirty years of practical theology which have certainly emerged out of forms of qualitative research, and in particular from traditions of congregational studies. My question, however, is whether these actually fulfil the expectations of action research, in terms of a full-blown commitment to first person reflexivity and to a collaborative model of engagement with research subjects.

Edward Farley was one of the earliest voices arguing for a greater focus on practical theology as a fundamentally interpretative pursuit.<sup>47</sup> He called for a shift of emphasis away from the ‘clerical paradigm’ of theological education conceived as ministerial skills or competences, towards a discipline which equipped the whole church for discipleship. Twenty years later, Pattison and Lynch were later to characterize this new wave of practical theology as signalling a turn “from

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>47</sup> Edward Farley, *Theologia*. The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education, Philadelphia (Fortress) 1983.

hints and helps to hermeneutics"<sup>48</sup>. For Farley, practical theology was distinguished by its focus not on texts or doctrines, as with systematic or philosophical branches, but with the understanding and interpretation of contexts and situations.<sup>49</sup>

Farley argued for the reintegration of the specialist areas of ministerial (as exclusively clerical) formation into a more reflective, corporate pedagogy, in which attention turned to the challenges of everyday experience and how theological understanding might be brought to bear. Practical theology is rooted in the activities of theological reflection rather than clergy formation, and relates to lived experience and concrete situations. This was not to abandon the traditions of clergy formation as a sub-field, but to understand how all activities of the whole church – liturgy, homiletics, mission, and so on – might be facilitated by specialist leadership whilst still nevertheless fundamentally be the task of the whole people of God.<sup>50</sup>

Farley's emphasis on practical theology as involving the hermeneutics not of texts but of contexts and situations was a plea to regard it as an interpretative and scholarly, albeit action-oriented, discipline. In his retrieval of the concept of *habitus* as a disposition or set of virtues acquired via immersion in the practices of faith, he argued for much of the later emphasis on practical theology as *phrónēsis* or practical wisdom. Farley speaks of practical theology as promoting "the hermeneutics of vocation"<sup>51</sup>, which already suggests a shape and direction to practical theology: of equipping all Christians to exercise a faithful calling, and one that is directed towards the cultivation of virtue and Christian perfection.

Don Browning's study of three North American urban congregations and his heuristic structure for the analysis of the dynamics of each community's distinctive 'practical reasoning' is now acknowledged as a classic text for contemporary practical theologians.<sup>52</sup> He argues that we must start with and from practice: that the world-views and norms implicit in theory-laden practices constitute the primary basis from which critical and constructive enquiry into congregational life must proceed.

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48 Stephen Pattison / Gordon Lynch, *Practical and Pastoral Theology*, in: David F. Ford and Rachel Muers (ed.), *The Modern Theologians*, Oxford (Blackwell) <sup>3</sup>2005, 408–426, 408.

49 Edward Farley, *Interpreting Situations. An Inquiry into the Nature of Practical Theology*, in: Lewis S. Mudge / James N. Poling (ed.), *Formation and Reflection. The Promise of Practical Theology*, Philadelphia (Fortress) 1983, 1–26, 1.

50 Farley (n. 52), 17–18.

51 *Ibid.*, 14.

52 Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology. Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*, Minneapolis (Fortress) 1991.

Browning argues that some kind of crisis in the life of a congregation, or a pressing practical challenge, will prompt a process of questioning or enquiry, as members turn to the sources and norms of their ethical and theological tradition for guidance. Thus, a process of analysis, characterised by Browning as the four-fold movement from ‘descriptive’ theology, to ‘historical’ and ‘systematic’ and finally to ‘strategic practical theology’, enables a rigorous excavation of the levels of practical reasoning, in order to understand “how religious experience and symbols interact with practical rationality in the shaping of the praxis of congregations.”<sup>53</sup> Browning also characterises this as a movement from “present theory-laden practice to a retrieval of normative theory-laden practice to the creation of more critically-held theory-laden practices.”<sup>54</sup>

This is how people of faith chart a course through life, balancing everyday demands of work, family and citizenship with their Christian calling. Yet in order to understand that process, it is necessary to begin with everyday practices and behaviours. Congregations do not exist as *tabulae rasae* into which the Word or revelation erupts. The descriptive stage thus exposes the dominant orientations that inform cultural and religious values; the historical stage examines the processes by which such narratives, doctrines or motifs have taken root; the systematic stage correlates practical reasoning with canonical texts and doctrines; and strategic practical identifies new or revised patterns of practice and corporate life.

But is it action research, as outlined so far? It bears many similarities to it, most notably in its problem-based origins and its objective of understanding how congregations actually function as “communities of memory and communities of practical reason”.<sup>55</sup> The entire cycle of research is practice-led and practice-driven; and the imperatives of strategic practical theology are clearly to generate revised practices and behaviours, as well as – possibly – an enhanced facility for self-understanding. But how collaborative was Browning’s research process? The descriptive stage involves a modicum of self-reflection, as members of the congregation are invited to research their own cultural and ethical standpoints.<sup>56</sup> Browning uses the example of Clinical Pastoral Education as a tool of understanding one’s own attitudes and behaviour; but the onus rests on the ‘professional’ researcher to develop this ‘descriptive’ stage.

It is debatable whether Browning really resolves another question about the nature of this research, which is the question of where its ‘integrating center’ is

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53 Ibid., 16.

54 Ibid., 7.

55 Ibid., 3.

56 Ibid., 72–74.

located.<sup>57</sup> In relation to Carl Dudley's original study of Wiltshire Methodist Church, he reflects that the multi-disciplinary team failed to articulate a sufficiently clear set of objectives – in particular, how such academic research would impact on the congregation. "As I look back now, it seems that it was never clear why this team, representing a great string of modern academic disciplines, was lined up to study this beleaguered church. Dudley wrote in the preface, "The purpose of this book is to provide new routes into the social and spiritual dynamics of the local church. Renewed appreciation for the congregation should release new energy among the membership to challenge and enliven the whole Body of Christ" (xii). He seemed to be saying that if we lined up a half dozen or more disciplinary snapshots of the Wiltshire Church, both secular and religious types would learn to love and appreciate congregations more. This expectation seems now a bit pious."<sup>58</sup>

Browning's point is that the earlier Wiltshire study failed to move substantially beyond 'descriptive' accounts to consider the strategic dimensions, and in particular "to situate description within a larger theological task."<sup>59</sup> It did not follow through to consider how new insights might take root in renewed forms of practical reasoning. But ultimately, it would appear that it was that shortcoming of analysis, rather than anything to do with the dynamic between the team and the congregation, that was at fault. So when he finally comes to consider the question of 'transformation', the question of the role of the researcher in that respect is never explicitly addressed. The nearest we get is to mention of the 'church consultants' amongst the Dudley team. The task of the researcher in that situation is to effect a constructive dialogue between descriptive and strategic practical theology, but not directly to design or facilitate processes of change. Browning is attentive to the dynamics of his own status as an outsider, but whom does he regard as 'the agents of transformation'? Whilst the outsider or consultant can advise right through to strategic practical stage<sup>60</sup>, Browning's view is that this remains the responsibility of the insiders – "community, minister, lay leader"<sup>61</sup>. Thus, unlike action research, Browning's model maintains the clear distinction between 'insider' and 'outsider'. Whilst he acknowledges that there may remain a continuing educational task in order to assist the congregation to bring the

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57 *Ibid.*, 21.

58 *Ibid.*

59 *Ibid.*, 22.

60 *Ibid.*, 285–6.

61 *Ibid.*, 279.

strategic practical stages to fruition, he does not appear to regard this as the responsibility of the consultant/researcher.<sup>62</sup>

Mary McClintock Fulkerson's study of Good Samaritan church in North Carolina is firmly within the ethnographic tradition of congregational studies, although it is also characterised by a high degree of self-awareness on her part of the dynamics of her encounters with members of the church, and the effect that this has on her.<sup>63</sup>

Once again, we can see how a particular understanding of the nature of practical theology engenders ambivalence towards the objectives of empirical research. Empirical study renders a 'theological reading' of a particular situation, pointing in particular to the ways in which practice is always already theologically suffused. Whilst her training has been in systematics, Fulkerson is convinced of the fundamentally practical nature of theology, in that practices are embodied, primary expressions of Christian truth-claims. Theology exists as the grammar of faithful practice, in order to guide the dilemmas of Christian discipleship. In a memorable phrase, citing Charles Winquist, Fulkerson speaks of theology "as response to a wound"<sup>64</sup> – emphasising the problem-solving, value-driven nature of practical theology, as well as powerfully resonant of Christology. Thus, practical theology is "a particular way of attending to the structure of a situation; *it is an inquiry shaped by the logic of transformation.*"<sup>65</sup> As a response to a wound, therefore, practical theology asks 'what must be done?' Even if it is only to bring the hidden realities of a complex situation to light, its implications are potentially life-changing; and practical theology itself is directed towards the generation of "action-guiding world-views"<sup>66</sup> that will address and transform that situation.

Whether this makes Fulkerson's research a piece of action research, is less certain. Whilst elements of reflexivity run throughout, this is more the self-consciousness of the ethnographer sensitive to her role in bringing forth the voices of her subjects. There is no suggestion that a specific project will be undertaken on a collaborative basis between Fulkerson and the people of Good Samaritan – although it is possible to conceive that some such project might be conceived. So the actual nature of the 'transformation' in question remains implicit; a factor Fulkerson acknowledges when she describes this as an 'unfin-

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>63</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption. Theology for a Worldly Church*, Oxford (Oxford University Press) 2007.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 22, emphasis in original.

<sup>65</sup> Fulkerson (n. 66), 22.

<sup>66</sup> Stephen Pattison, *Seeing Things. Deepening Relations with Visual Artefacts*, London (SCM) 2007, 7.

ished task', falling short of what Browning would term 'strategic practical theology'.

Fundamentally, however, Fulkerson's objectives lay elsewhere, in a project which sought an authentic, ethnographic 'rendition' of a congregation and its context in terms of embodied practices.<sup>67</sup>

Overall, then, it would appear that whilst there is attention to the subjectivity or positionality of the researcher in these studies, most of them stop short of any kind of first person reflexivity – in Herr and Anderson's terms, the researcher is more off, than on, the page. Furthermore, whilst most have attempted to undertake some kind of consultancy with their subjects, there is little true collaboration in terms of research design. As Martin Stringer has observed, most congregational studies operate as a form of applied research – "as a precursor to action, not really a part of it"<sup>68</sup> – rather than emerging inductively and collaboratively from the situation. Questions of accountability, and the end uses of research outcomes, often rest with academic publication, rather than informing in a structured fashion the life of the communities concerned. In that respect, it does not correspond with Browning's category of 'strategic practical theology', something that adopts models of theological formation in pursuit of deeper theological literacy or understanding. Edward Farley's retrieval of a tradition of practical theology as the pursuit of *habitus* – as a discipline concerned with the processes of Christian formation for discipleship – comes closest, perhaps, to a model of learning in order to inhabit an acquired and emergent system of practices that cultivates the virtues and our capacity to recognise and pursue the good.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Fulkerson (n. 66), 250–254.

<sup>68</sup> Martin Stringer, Putting Congregational Studies to Work. Ethnography, Consultancy and Change, in: Matthew Guest / Linda Woodhead / Karin Tusting (ed.), Congregational Studies in the UK, London (Ashgate) 203–214, 210–211.

<sup>69</sup> A more successful experiment in utilising forms of first person action research in practical theology is emerging as a result of the new wave of professional doctorate programmes in Practical Theology in the United Kingdom. Through practices of journaling and a reflective practice assignment, candidates are required to exercise a sustained level of reflexivity throughout and alongside their academic research. In addition, one of the criteria of 'doctoralness' for the programme is that candidates should be able to demonstrate a 'contribution to knowledge' within a triangulation of academy, continuing professional development and organizational change, thereby fulfilling the objectives of action research as facilitating transformation and new understandings. See Elaine L. Graham, The Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: an Idea Whose Time has Come?, in: IJPT 10/2 (2007), 298–311; Zoe E. Bennett / Elaine L. Graham, The Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology. Developing the Researching Professional in Practical Theology in Higher Education, in: Journal of Adult Theological Education 5/1 (2008), 33–51; Elaine L. Graham, Changing the Subject. When 'Enquiry' Gets Personal, in: Case-Studies. CEEBL-

## ‘Propositional’ or ‘Dispositional’ Knowledge?

So we already have the suggestion, echoing action research perspectives, that inquiry which simply facilitates best practice or technical competence is inadequate, since the task is essentially interpretative or hermeneutical. Similarly, it is not simply a matter of reorientating practice in order to correspond to a pre-existent or universal ideal, or in order that behaviour should align itself with doctrine. Rather, practice is understood as a *locus theologicus*; as a source of encounter with and apprehension of God. Reflection on practice is thus primary material for greater knowledge and understanding of God and a source of insight into the nature of faithful living. It embodies a commitment to knowledge not for its own sake but for a practical and transformative process – the facilitation of theological wisdom that nurtures and underpins any human activity in the world.

However, our discussion of the values of action research have begun to reveal an important connection between the pursuit of social or organizational change with the cultivation of inner skills of discernment and connectedness with transpersonal or transcendent reality. This is not simply about knowledge in service of greater technical skill, but listening to the voices of disclosure and divine encounter. I would suggest that an appropriate term for this is *attentiveness*. This emphasises the capacity-building qualities of action research; as I have argued, not simply in terms of techniques or strategies, but in terms of the capabilities of participants to be schooled in the values that nurture their practice. The discipline of mindfulness, exploration and transformation are valuable heuristic tools but also describe a deeper orientation towards a more authentic way of being – whether that is located within a broadly humanistic framework or Christian tradition.

A number of action researchers have seen in this emphasis on the cultivation of character a strong affinity with an Aristotelian understanding of *phrónēsis*, variously rendered as ‘practical wisdom’, or ‘prudence’.<sup>70</sup> As Olav Eikeland argues, for example, *phrónēsis* is profoundly deliberative pursuit, a perfect synthesis of action and reflection, since it pertains to praxis or doing, of acts having intrinsic meaning. Praxis is “morally committed, and oriented and informed by tradition”<sup>71</sup> in which the aim of education is to prepare students to live well. Building capacity for transformative action necessarily demands a degree of moral autonomy and

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supported projects 2008–10, online available at: <http://www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/ceeb/projects/> [June 30, 2010].

<sup>70</sup> Eikeland (n. 11).

<sup>71</sup> Stephen Kemmis / T.J. Smith, *Enabling Praxis. Challenges for Education*, Rotterdam (Sense Publishers) 2007.



agency; and it also entails the nurture of communities of character. One cannot prescribe practical wisdom, nor can it be delegated to technical experts, since it is not about the application of instrumental or theoretical knowledge, or about the following of rules. Rather, the acquisition of *phrónēsis* is about taking the practice of virtue, the cultivation of excellence, 'to heart'. Reflection and action are a unity in the pursuit of "ministering to the good of life"<sup>72</sup>, and the intellectual and moral dimensions of *phrónēsis* cannot be separated. "According to Aristotle, the ethical virtues are rather concerned with the formation of character (*ēthos*) through becoming habituated and accustomed to, and thereby gradually avoiding and seeking 'spontaneously' or by inclination, the 'right kinds and amounts' of pleasures and pains in acting and feeling."<sup>73</sup> Yet it should be clear, also, why such pursuits can never be value-neutral or value-free.

Practical wisdom is less about the acquisition of propositional knowledge, then, than the cultivation of character, of *disposition*. So action research is necessarily engaged in the formation of virtue, in the sense of individuals and communities capable of practical deliberation and becoming autonomous moral agents. Action research "has to concern itself with and transform the formative learning processes and the research work directed towards principles, ends, and definitions, too."<sup>74</sup> It must promote the greater *virtuosity* of those who are the bearers of practical wisdom, as they learn and exercise the 'grammar' of virtue.

## Action Research as 'Spiritual' Practice

As we have seen, action research presents itself as highly value-driven, with principles of participation and human flourishing at its heart. But where do these values come from? A common thread would appear to be a broadly humanistic world-view, in which principles of autonomy and personal growth inform and inspire. Much of the literature also draws on forms of existentialism, in which an individual's ability to take responsibility for their own actions and their own learning is taken as the measure of authenticity.<sup>75</sup> The practices of first person action research, designed to cultivate self-awareness in relation to a cycle of Being-Thinking-Learning-Acting-Communicating,<sup>76</sup> are valued as essential tools

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<sup>72</sup> van Manen (n. 15), 155.

<sup>73</sup> Eikeland (n. 11), 26.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>75</sup> John Rowan, *The Humanistic Approach to Action Research*, in: Reason and Bradbury (n. 5), 108.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 109–111.

in apprehending the nature of personal experience – or as John Rowan puts it, the “Real Self”.<sup>77</sup>

Other writers draw upon disciplines such as quantum physics, arguing for the indivisibility of matter and consciousness in which “all things are in instant and enduring communicative union [...] with each other.”<sup>78</sup> Jean McNiff argues for the interconnectedness of all things, in which a tiny action has far-flung repercussions. Everything is linked into an open system, in which “consciousness, practice, dialogue, social formations”<sup>79</sup> are in dynamic interaction. The reality of a transcendent or trans-personal reality at the heart of creation calls forth a response of participation and co-creation in which ‘subject’ and ‘object’ are ontologically connected.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the ontological givenness of creation’s interdependence gives rise to a reverence for the world, and a particular way of being, knowing and acting that represents an urgent moral imperative. Action research may be committed to social amelioration, and yet it is also a profoundly *spiritual* practice which seeks to contemplate and connect to, the very well-springs of existence:

“Participative consciousness is part of a resacralization of the world, a re-enchantment of the world [...] Sacred experience is based in reverence, in awe and love for creation, valuing it for its own sake, in its own right as a living presence. To deny participation not only offends against human justice, not only leads to errors in epistemology, not only strains the limits of the natural world, but is also troublesome for human souls and for the *anima mundi*. Given the condition of our times, a primary purpose of human inquiry is not so much to search for truth but to *heal*, and above all to heal the alienation, the split that characterizes modern experience.”<sup>81</sup>

This is a firmly holistic world-view, in which ideological or reductionist accounts of reality are rejected in favour of lived, phenomenological accounts. Ultimately, therefore, the purpose of reflective inquiry such as action research is the flourishing of the human and more-than-human world, in all its complexity and interconnectedness. Thinking and doing are oriented towards seeking and connecting with an ultimate unity which is not only transpersonal but, according to much of the action research literature, transcendent in character: “The actual experience of the real self is [...] a mystical experience. This is the feeling of being

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 107 ff.

<sup>78</sup> Reason / Bradbury (n. 5), 8.

<sup>79</sup> McNiff (n. 7), 7.

<sup>80</sup> John Heron, Quality as Primacy of the Practical, in: *Qualitative Inquiry* 2/1 (1996), 41–56; Reason / Bradbury (n. 5), 8–12.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 11.

in touch with my own centre, my inner identity, my true self, my authenticity – that self which lies behind or beyond all self-images or self-concepts or sub-personalities.”<sup>82</sup>

Nevertheless, most action researchers maintain a deeply humanistic and existential stance, in which principles of autonomy and self-determination – rather than observance of an extant and collective spiritual tradition or discipline beyond one’s own immediate experience – still take precedence: “This is the classic existential insight, that we are responsible for being ourselves, and this is a high and deep responsibility indeed. If we take responsibility for ourselves, we are fully human. This seems to me a very important step in psychospiritual development, because it is a gateway to the realization that we *must have spiritual experiences for ourselves*, we cannot get them from someone else. This is the basic attitude of the mystic in all religious traditions – to get inside one’s own experience, to commit oneself to one’s own experience, to trust one’s own experience.”<sup>83</sup>

We might dispute this portrayal of religious mystical life as rooted entirely in personal or subjective experience, however. For example, Grace Jantzen’s study of women mystics refutes notions of the phenomenon as purely one of interiority, arguing that whilst such figures took a critical stance to institutional authority, they were nevertheless fully immersed in the disciplines and traditions of inherited and corporate religious practice.<sup>84</sup> Action research writers’ evocation of spirituality is therefore problematic in its somewhat eclectic and uncritical appropriation of a wide range of cultures, historical epochs and perspectives. Nevertheless, it does draw attention to a strong holistic values-base, and one in which the search for outer change is mirrored by a quest for inner meaning and transformation.

Some action researchers, however, draw more selectively from specific traditions in which they themselves are active participants. Hence, Valerie Bentz and Jeremy Shapiro draw on Buddhist traditions of ‘mindfulness’ or mindful enquiry in order to connect spiritual teachings and practices of meditation with first person reflection.<sup>85</sup> But it is possibly David Coghlan’s use of Ignatian spiritual exercises as a model of action-reflection that holds most relevance for our discussion, since he grounds his practices of research inquiry with an epistemology that is explicitly theistic. His advocacy of Ignatian spiritual exercises and Bernard

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**82** Rowan (n. 78), 108.

**83** *Ibid.*, 108.

**84** Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, Manchester (Manchester University Press), 1995.

**85** Valerie M. Bentz / Jeremy J. Shapiro, *Mindfulness in Social Research*, London (Sage) 1998.

Lonergan's cycle of four 'transcendental precepts' goes beyond mere technique to endorse processes of discernment and encounter with transcendence that constitutes a valuable epistemology and theological method. It also bears significant similarity to forms of practical theology as reflection on experience.

Whilst mindful of the noticeable turn to spirituality within action research literature, Coghlan has no intention of attempting to colonise all such work within a comprehensive theological framework. It is, he argues, but one perspective amongst many, within a discipline that acknowledges the plurality of its theoretical underpinnings. Nevertheless, in true spirit of first person research, Coghlan offers his own experience as one formed within a Jesuit tradition – and in particular as a participant in Ignatian spiritual exercises – as providing an important methodological and epistemological insight. For those approaching action research through a practical theological framework, however, Coghlan's work is significant in that it provides a bridge between the two perspectives and offers one route into a systematic articulation of the values and world-view underpinning the methods and convictions of action research.

Coghlan locates himself within a broadly personalist tradition of modern Roman Catholic thought, and refers in particular to the work of the Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan for insights into the way in which action, and reflection on action, might be a source of revelation. In this respect, he returns us to the unresolved question, encountered in my discussion of theological action research, of how far 'experience' and situational analysis gleaned from the methods of action research, might conceivably be a source of renewed theological understanding – and from that, how far a model of action research might facilitate greater theological discernment or literacy amongst participants. In Ignatian spiritual exercises and in Lonergan's emphasis on the experiencing subject who apprehends the presence of God as one active in the world, Coghlan connects a series of spiritual exercises with contemporary reflective practice – as typified by action research – as potential methods of theological reflection and formation.

For Coghlan, Ignatius of Loyola's "Spiritual Exercises" identify lived experience as the sphere in which God is revealed. This is not a form of spiritual contemplation or meditation that removes the practitioner from the everyday, sensate world, but actually a vehicle for deepening one's apprehension of reality, for cultivating "a prayerful self-awareness in a life of activity."<sup>86</sup>

However, this is not experience at random, but one schooled in the disciplines of contemplation. The purposes of the "Spiritual Exercises" are to nurture

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<sup>86</sup> David Coghlan, *Ignatian Spirituality as transformational social science*, in: *Action Research* 3/1 (2005), 89–107,94.

the believer in a deeper understanding of God at work in their experience, assisted by structured readings of Scripture. Whether it is the reflective and strategic approach of action research, or the spiritual exercises of Ignatian tradition, therefore, Coghlan argues for significant convergence, in terms of a shared commitment to a cyclical movement of experience-reflection-judgement-action<sup>87</sup> and the cultivation of discernment in the service of action for transformation. But Coghlan moves beyond a broad humanistic affirmation of the human faculty to pursue the good, in favour of contemplation that connects the practitioner with a reality that is not only transpersonal but transcendent and theistic: "God can be sought and found in our own experience [...] The Ignatian God is busy, and is to be found not, or not only, in some static bliss, but rather in acting in the world."<sup>88</sup>

Similarly, Lonergan's epistemology is founded on an explicit theological anthropology in which the human subject engages with reality via three cognitive processes: experiencing, understanding and judging. This is not a disengaged or passive form of contemplation, but one that begins and returns to practice. This is a view of God as one who is active in the world, encountered in lived experience and invites individuals to share in God's continuing activity in the world. In attending to experience, making judgements and taking responsibility (a staple concept for Lonergan), the believer nurtures their capability for discerning, and participating in, the activity of God. This represents "an attention to experience and a method of reflection which does not stop at introspection but drives towards meaning and value and ultimately action."<sup>89</sup>

Coghlan argues that for action researchers, such a connection to a definable and living spiritual tradition offers a structured and extant discipline that addresses the processes of experiential knowing that is fully integrated into a living tradition of religious values. Existential 'authenticity', such an emphasis of humanistic action research, is given deeper dimension by linking into the nature of the divine. The one who is actively engaged in mindful action in the world will encounter a transcendent dimension to experience by coming to know the God who continues to act in and reveal Godself in the world – including human culture and experience – and who is to be known in the processes of creation's unfolding towards its ultimate fulfilment. Reflection is a means of ensuring the authenticity and discernment by which we come to know ourselves but also – for

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**87** David Coghlan, *Authenticity as First Person Practice. An Exploration based on Bernard Lonergan*, in: *Action Research* 6/3 (2008), 351–366.

**88** Coghlan (n. 89), 93.

**89** David Coghlan, *Attending to Experience. Reflections on Engaging in: Action Research*, Unpublished paper (2003), 2.

Loneragan and Coghlan – to know the reality of a God who continues to be revealed and encountered in the empirical world.

In Coghlan's work, therefore, the practical theologian might see how an action-orientation of action research can be rooted in a clear value-system. Effectively, Coghlan is insisting that a spiritual discipline which seeks knowledge of God does so by participating in and aligning itself with the *practices* of God. But he also emphasises how the subjectivity of the action researcher themselves, as one who engages in purposeful, situated reflection on practice, is essentially a contemplative and reflexive undertaking, and one that is ultimately directed towards the cultivation of character – of a dispositional knowing of the seeker after truth.

Similar themes are present in Barbara McClure's adoption of the motif of 'attending' as the core imperative of practical or pastoral theology. Pastoral 'attention' implies a vocation of listening and waiting; of hearing another's story, or adopting tools of social analysis in order to probe the complexities of a given context. Moreover in its association with the role of an 'attendant' who may be on hand to offer practical assistance, it carries resonances with Christian service or ministry. Thus, for McClure, pastoral attention is profoundly heuristic and hermeneutic, as a method of discernment; and yet it never loses its practical moorings. 'Attending' is a matter of both action *and* reflection. It synthesizes a pastoral role of being present and mindful of the needs and well-being of the other, with an openness to new insights that transcend functional consideration. Rather, it creates a space in which divine revelation and transformation may appear: "Attending creates temporal space for God, truth, mystery, the sacred, to present itself. It presupposes the possibilities of new realities breaking forth."<sup>90</sup>

McClure develops the idea of attention in the direction of priorities for practical theology that draw close to action research. She is concerned to address corporate and structural impediments to human well-being, and so commends a form of collaborative enquiry with institutions to attend to organizational values and cultures. Her emphasis on attendance as implying accompaniment as well as listening chimes in well with the participatory and consultative ethos of action research, and comes close to some of the Buddhist-inspired literature in action research which upholds the pursuit of 'mindfulness' as its quintessential goal.

More recently, the British practical theologian Jane Leach has considered how the task of 'paying attention' might lie at the heart of theological reflection and formation. It entails interpreting situations in such a way as to allow them to

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<sup>90</sup> Barbara J. McClure, *Pastoral Theology as the Art of Paying Attention. Widening the Horizons*, in: *IJPT* 12 (2008), 189–210,191.

speak in all their complexity – working intuitively as well as cognitively – as a means of discerning the will of God. Like McClure, Leach sees this activity as exercised quintessentially in the pastoral accompaniment of those in need, but as something that must resist the 'quick fix' of ameliorative action in favour of a deeper *habitus* of waiting, listening and reflecting. Whilst she never names this as action research, she does commend it as a model of ministerial formation or supervision; and she follows a familiar five-stage process broadly based on patterns of "Look-Think-Act".<sup>91</sup> Like action research, as well, it is directed as much towards corporate discernment as individual achievement. A "deep listening to the self"<sup>92</sup> is a pre-requisite to ensuring that the voices of others are heard, as part of facilitating deeper reflection in others.

## Conclusion

Like action research, theological action research has a number of objectives: firstly, to understanding a situation; secondly, to praxis-driven change; but thirdly, and critically, to the formation of character and agency, nurtured by the well-spring of its core values. In identifying with the goals and values of action research, practical theologians are sharing a conviction that research is never 'pure' or dispassionate, but oriented towards the achievement of practical outcomes. In that respect, it necessarily holds the activities of action and reflection in synthesis, since the outcomes of investigation are not simply the transformation of the 'outer' world of situations, institutions and communities but is ultimately rooted in the cultivation of the 'inner' self in the habits of practical wisdom. Such investigation may be described as the practice of 'attentiveness' to a situation, undertaking modes of enquiry and discernment that not only lead to practical strategies but result in the cultivation of practical wisdom. Practical theologians working within an action research paradigm commit themselves to nurturing ordinary people's autonomous and lived apprehensions of God as the well-spring of practical discipleship: in Farley's terms, a "hermeneutics of vocation".<sup>93</sup>

Marx's philosopher may have prioritised action over reflection, but action research teaches us that the two are unavoidably intertwined. In 'attending' to situations, practical theology is certainly contextual and problem-based; but it is also interpretative, hermeneutical and theological.

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<sup>91</sup> Stringer (n. 6), 9–10.

<sup>92</sup> Jane Leach, *Pastoral Theology as Attention*, in: *Contact. Practical Theology and Pastoral Care* 153 (2007), 19–32.

<sup>93</sup> Farley (n. 52), 14.

Practical theologians may find common cause with the struggles of action researchers to hold together the difficult demands of generating research that not only seeks to understand a situation, but to transform it – in the mould of the critical philosopher as famously advanced by Karl Marx. The objectives of such a model of practical theology, then, would be both to study faith in practice using qualitative methods, but also to put such data to work in the cultivation of theologically-grounded practical wisdom. In adopting action research methods, practical theologians are not simply concerned with change management or the techniques of activism, but with schooling people in the well-springs of tradition from which practical wisdom flows.