

## Book Review

*Talking About God In Practice*

*Theological Action Research and Practical Theology*

Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti *et al.*

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Reviewed by Jocelyn M. Bryan

The Wesley Study Centre, St John's College, Durham

j.m.bryan@durham.ac.uk

One of the constant challenges for practical theology is faithfully relating the multifaceted discipline of theology to the practices of Christian discipleship and pastoral ministry. The demarcation between academic theology and practice has been to the detriment of both in many ways. This book brings a new approach to the task of addressing this. Theological Action Research (TAR) engages with the complexities and difficulties of paying attention to the diversity and depth of practice and experience, whilst at the same time being committed to the truthfulness of Christian wisdom. The authors describe practical theology as 'a discipline committed to making whole and dynamic the truthfulness of Christian thought in action, through the bringing together of aspects of faith which can never be separated'. Hence, this book is written out of a context that views practical theology as a discipline which strives in 'explicit and varied ways to enable the Christian practitioner to articulate faith – to speak of God, in practice'. Its underlying premise is that practice needs to be more theological and theology more practical. By sharing the wisdom of the Action Research Church and Society project (ARCS), an ecumenical collaboration, which was established at Heythrop College, University of London, in 2006, the authors report on the methodology they developed – Theological Action Research (TAR) – and also their model for theological reflection called *Four Voices of Theology*. These are offered as a response to the challenge of 'talking about God in practice'.

The structure of the book is well ordered and clear. Five sections take the reader through a logical process, which begins with an identification of the problem of 'talking about God in practice' in contemporary culture, followed by an introduction to TAR, how it can be employed, some examples from the ARCS project, and an evaluation of the method and conclusion.

The introduction offers useful information regarding the structure of the book and how to use it. This is particularly helpful, especially the section describing different routes through the book depending on whether the aim is to undertake a TAR-based

project or to engage with the text as an academic exercise in evaluating it as a method of practical theology. Eleven appendices at the end of the book contain a wealth of material ranging from a grid of ARCS research projects to examples of consent forms, questionnaires and different schedules: all of which are useful to a new researcher. There is also a short list of good suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter.

The commitment to TAR as a method infused with theology, along with the conviction that the practices of faithful Christians are bearers of theology, is the first of five characteristics of TAR which are described in detail in Part Two. These are evaluated in Part Five by distilling the learning from the case studies described in Part Four. However, the re-examination does not include any detailed comparison of TAR with other methods of practical theology in the contemporary literature. For some, this may be a frustration.

This is a book which makes practical challenges its primary concern, drawing insightfully on the experience of ARCS projects over the past four years. TAR is explained and described well, and some illuminating worked examples are chosen which demonstrate the value of the approach and the 'four voices' model of theological reflection. That said, the authors fail to provide a detailed academic critique of the method, and devote a considerable part of the book to the process of adopting a team approach, setting up TAR and conducting the research.

Overall, the book has many strengths. It is very accessible and offers a wealth of guidance and useful hints and tips for good practice in researching church and community groups. Rooted in the experience and reflections of skilled practical theologians, it offers something fresh and fruitful in this emerging field of study. Three worked examples, from a parish, a diocese, and a faith-based agency, demonstrate the usefulness of the method, and also the learning for the methodology from the process. With the acknowledgement that this is a work in progress, there is an openness from other researchers to insights and suggestions for refinement and development. Undoubtedly practical theologians will benefit from engagement with this new and significant approach, as will practitioners in a range of contexts. This is an exciting book which offers a careful and distinctive response to one of the persistent challenges of practical theology.

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