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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Pete Ward and Knut Tveitereid

The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research has its origins in the conversations that have taken place within the Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network. The network started in 2007 with a conference exploring how theologians might work more closely with what was at the time loosely called “ethnography.” These debates have continued at the American Academy of Religion in the Ecclesial Practices group and through the journal Ecclesial Practices published by Brill.

Our interest in this area was, in part, spawned by George Lindbeck’s proposal in The Nature of Doctrine (1984) that ethnography should have a significant role to play in theological method. Qualitative research had for some time been used within practical theology and fields such as liturgical studies and Christian education. Here the convention had been that social science formed a moment in the examination of practice. The researcher was expected to step into a new discipline to complete a certain kind of analysis through empirical methods, and then they were to move to the theological discipline to reflect on the social scientific data that had been gathered. What has generally been termed the “correlational approach” became institutionalized within theological education through the pastoral cycle. Something akin to correlation is inherent in Lindbeck’s thinking, but for many of us the interesting questions and challenges emerged when we began to use qualitative methods as theologians without assuming that, in order to do this, we had to switch disciplinary identities. In other words, reaching beyond correlation and the assumption that specific methods, such as interviews or participant observation or focus groups, necessarily meant juggling different disciplinary hats, to a place where theological questions and concerns would remain the focus of research throughout.

In the last 20 years, there has been a steady rise in the number of doctoral students and academics who have taken up the challenge of working as theologians with qualitative methods of inquiry. This upsurge in interest has been driven by the sense that theology
needs to be deeply rooted in contexts. Qualitative research has become a way to pay close attention to communities and individuals who have previously been excluded or silenced in theological work. Alongside this, there has been a deep desire to do research that makes a difference in the Church and wider society. Qualitative research offers the promise of a robust and disciplined means of paying attention that can shape theological engagement. The sense is that theological proposals for the life of the Church and for society, in order to be useful and credible, need to be formulated in and through a deep engagement with communities. In the process of generating new insights and perspectives, it has become clear that what is meant by theology and, indeed, what it means to be a theologian has undergone significant revision. This volume is born of an excitement around these developments.

In the chapters that follow, different researchers set out their journey in this fast-emerging field of study. It is worth saying at the outset that while many of us have been involved in the Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network, it would be wrong to assume that suggests a unified approach or viewpoint. We come with different theological commitments and disciplinary locations. We also represent a variety of approaches to and uses of qualitative methods. What the chapters in this book represent is a convergence around the epistemological and methodological issues that arise in the intersection between theology and qualitative research.

The conversation has led us to at least three realizations thus far: First, when theology and qualitative research are brought together, theology is shaped by it. Qualitative research offers theology access to voices from below in a systematic manner. New forms of theology are given a voice, albeit these voices are not new in the sense that they are produced by the research – they are there already – but brought to attention and given status through qualitative methods. These voices often bring critique, nuance, messiness, expansion, creativity, and revelation to the table of theology. An apparent aim for this book is to underline these kinds of contributions.

Second, when theology and qualitative methods are brought together, qualitative research is shaped by it. Theology, at its best, makes people see. Theology offers language, concepts, and models for the researcher to see what is in the empirical field. Theology, then, can give the researcher – and thereby the reader – a richer and truer image of what is already at play. Over time, some qualitative approaches methods have proven particularly helpful. Other approaches have been developed further to better fit with studying theology in practice, to which this book accounts.

Third, when theology and qualitative methods are brought together, new problems arise. The relationship between the two is not an obvious one, nor is it frictionless. Traditionally theology is, in Kantian terms, situated within the “world of ideas,” whereas qualitative methods aim at describing the “world of experiences.” In theory, the two are incommensurable. In practice, however, an increasing number of researchers insist on the relationship and find it fruitful. We have tried not to let the newly won enthusiasm overshadow the proper problems that are present. Several limitations, reservations, and dilemmas are identified and discussed throughout the book.

The book is divided into parts. Part I “Naming the Field” depicts how theology and qualitative research represents different things to different people, depending on the angle of approach and the perspectives they bring to the conversation. In this first part, we have invited central scholars to describe the field from their perspective, identify what is at stake, and name this emerging research interest. Driving questions are: What is the contribution of qualitative
research to the field of theology? How is the field of theology and qualitative research perceived from various perspectives? How does theology and qualitative research change what it means to be a theologian?

Part II “Theology and Qualitative Research as Forms of Knowledge” aims to qualify theology and qualitative research epistemologically. Whenever a theologian adopts qualitative research methods, fundamental questions could and should be raised: How is qualitative research theological, and how do we know that? What is theology, and where is it found? What is its revelatory status and its normativity?

Part III “Theology and Qualitative Research: Continuities and Discontinuities” highlights how theology and qualitative research relies on several theological traditions in critical dialogue. This part positions theology and qualitative research by describing continuities and discontinuities in selected theological traditions. The central question in this is: What is the theological contribution of qualitative research beyond practical theology?

Part IV “The Empirical Turn in Practical Theology” describes how qualitative research has become the modus operandi of practical theological research, thereby changing the discipline from within. Even practical theology’s clerical subdisciplines are broadened and reshaped by empirical insights. Core questions are: How is theology and qualitative research shaping practical theology? How can theology and qualitative research contribute to the understanding of Church ministry, including education for ministry?

Part V “The Practice Theology and Qualitative Research” critically explores what happens to the craft of qualitative research when used by theologians. The chapters are not an exhaustive review of all methods or phases of research but seek to highlight some of the more common approaches to qualitative research in theology and its implications: Is there something distinctly unique in how a theologian is doing qualitative research? What methods have, in particular, proven valuable within theology?

In the final part, “Responses and Dissent,” we let voices from the outside be heard. Selected scholars – familiar to, but not necessarily acquainted with Ecclesiology and Ethnography – describe and assess theology and qualitative research from their perspective. Central questions are: What are the blind spots of theology and qualitative research? Which areas should future scholarship pay better attention to? How is the contribution of theology and qualitative research viewed outside the western world?

A standing joke compares a theologian to a blind person who enters a dark room searching for a black cat that is not there – and finds it. Admittedly, theologians have blind spots, but this book argues that theologians equipped with qualitative ways of seeing have better vision than those without. The question of whether or not the cat – in the sense of God – is there will always be a question of faith, not scientific observation. Nevertheless, this book argues, alongside the rest of the theological field, that theology, indeed, is present in most rooms, in and out of Church. The cat – understood as words, interpretations, practices, and experiences about God – is there to be observed. In fact, more often than not, there is more than one theology present. Theology and qualitative research represent this diversity, complexity, and richness, which corresponds well to theologies in the lived.

Reference

As the interest in theology and qualitative research has grown, academics have journeyed with its possibilities in different ways. The effect has been not simply the challenge and opportunity of a new research method but also a sense of excitement around the new insights and perspectives that qualitative research brings to the task of doing theology. In this first part, we have invited people to write about their experience and the various ways they have found qualitative research to be a fruitful and challenging approach to doing theology.
CHAPTER 2

Theology and Qualitative Research: An Uneasy Relationship

Pete Ward

There is a joke that I think neatly encapsulates our conversations around theology and qualitative research. It is loosely based on Isaiah 11:6, but somehow the biblical vision of peace and harmony is given a world-weary twist, “And the lion shall lie down with the lamb, but the lamb won’t get much sleep.” The joke of course relies on the power imbalance between the lion and the lamb, and it is precisely this issue that lies at the heart of the academic consideration of the relationship between theology and qualitative research, although which might be considered as being the lamb and which the lion might vary. Both carry in them an epistemological force. Qualitative research implies notions of empirical evidence and observation; theology, on the other hand, has tended to align itself with notions of revelation and rationality. These epistemological concerns are shaped by disciplinary norms and conventions that have until quite recently served to structure the relationship between theology and qualitative research in ways that mean they generally regard themselves as distinct. Keeping things separate has been orientated in different ways depending on disciplinary identity but, put simply, theologians and social scientists have established conventions that, although differently configured, serve as a way to ensure that theology and qualitative research do not have to lie down together.

Opting for Single Rooms

The standard approach to this issue in theology has been to utilize ideas of correlation (Tracy 1975). Basic to this approach is the conviction that while theology should draw upon forms of knowledge generated by qualitative methods, the conversation is structured around
distinct moments (Browning 1991). The forms of knowledge that come from empirical work are then to be correlated with forms of knowledge that are seen as theological. It is fundamental to this approach that qualitative research methods are seen as being part of a distinct discipline, namely social science, and that theology is in its essence something distinct. Correlation was institutionalized in practical theology through various versions of the pastoral cycle where students were taught to negotiate a path from practice to theory via stages that start with analysis drawn from the social sciences followed by biblical and doctrinal reflection (Thompson 2008). Correlation in a sense solved the problem by keeping theology and qualitative research in separate rooms. While a conversation takes place, fundamentally each is allowed its own space to be its own person (Pattison 2007). Here notions of respect and hearing the other are key, but for many in the theological world there has been a distinct concern to maintain strict boundaries. Theology, it is argued, is a discipline set apart and it alone is able to speak about God (Milbank 1990). Social science might have a place, but it also needs to know its place.

These kinds of attitudes are not found only among theologians, social science has also been concerned to draw lines in ways that establish clear disciplinary boundaries. Here theology is acceptable as long as it is seen as being data, so a consideration of the beliefs, myths, rituals, and practices of a particular group or community often forms a part of the study of religion (Marti 2016). Theology might be discussed, but it features because it is part of the fieldwork context. Theology is important to the participants and the context and as such it is rightfully a part of a study. Theology as data is acceptable, but theology as an external theoretical framework or critical form of analysis is not. This means that when it comes to theoretical considerations, analysis, and most significantly any attempt to draw implications and conclusions, theological voices from outside the data set are not normally seen as playing a role.

Opting for single rooms makes a great deal of sense. It solves the uncomfortable task of finding a way to get along. It keeps things simple, and it fulfills the requirements of academic convention. It is worth being straightforward about precisely what lies at the heart of the problem. The word “theology” is basically a polite way to introduce God into the conversation. The real issue is not how disciplines work or what methods are required; the fundamental point of contention is God. Social scientists for the most part don’t do God. Theologians, on the other hand, think they are uniquely placed to talk about God. This is what makes the relationship awkward. Getting to grips with what exactly is going on, however, requires some fancy academic footwork or at least the odd nimble dance move. The first move relates to qualitative research itself.

The convention has been to regard qualitative research as social science. This means that the theologian does not simply immediately adopt new methods of inquiry, but also tends to internalize some sense that they are moving outside their discipline. This is a form of correlation that is carried inside a disciplinary identity. The first nimble dance step, then, is to begin to see the methods associated with qualitative research as something distinct from any disciplinary location within the social sciences. This should not mean setting on one side all the wisdom gained, for instance in ethnographic research within anthropology, or the methodological discussions around participation and fieldwork within sociology. Theologians should be open to learning and theory from a range of sources. The key issue that is at stake here is the simple move that says the methods that make up qualitative research are not inevitably or essentially located within one disciplinary context. Removing this assumption means that is perfectly
possible for a theologian to make use of qualitative research methods in much the same way as geographers, educationalists, criminologists and ethnomusicologists routinely do. The point here is that the methods used in qualitative research do not of themselves predetermine any disciplinary location. The historic reluctance on the part of theologians to embrace qualitative research is slightly curious given the ease with which forms of literary criticism or philosophy or history are incorporated in a range of theological projects. On a practical level it is important to note that fieldwork takes a significant investment not simply in terms of the time it takes, but also in the engagement and apprentice-based learning of the craft that is required to do it well. For a theologian who has already been expected to master philosophy, languages, biblical studies, and the history of doctrine this can feel daunting. That said it is not really the demands of fieldwork that stand in the way of theology and qualitative research finding a way to coexist; basically it boils down to the question of God and negotiating the God question requires more nimble footwork.

The Really Awkward Question

I was first drawn to qualitative research as a result of my work among young people (Ward 2008). A few years working as a youth minister convinced me that the issues that I was facing were in some sense cultural as much as they were spiritual or theological (Ward 1997). Moving into qualitative research has been a logical outworking of this realization. There were, however, significant theological concerns at play for me. Questions of culture also led toward contextual theology. Here the central concern rotated around what exactly was meant by theology and who should be considered as a theologian. Assumptions then around what was meant when we used the word “theology” became problematized (Bevans 1992). Qualitative research was a vantage point, or a means to explore the dynamics of contextualization. If theology was to be seen as positioned in social and cultural locations, then the obvious way to address this insight is to adopt a form of social inquiry that paid close attention to these dynamics. Qualitative research was an ideal method to explore this kind of contextual theology but in truth it has been a road less traveled, with contextual theologians often choosing to work with philosophy or critical theory rather than fieldwork. What qualitative research brings to contextual theology is a disciplined and structured approach to hearing the voices of individuals and communities who have often been overlooked, which has been one of the most closely held values of contextual theology from its outset.

When theologians engage deeply in fieldwork awkwardness is ever present. Qualitative research disrupts settled positions and assumptions (Swinton and Mowat 2006). Within some theological circles it has been assumed that there is a distinction between first and second order forms of theology (Lindbeck 1984). First order theology is found in the everyday life of the Christian community, and it is intimately related to scripture and shaped by liturgical life and the sacraments. Second order theology is, by contrast conducted by academic theologians who engage in critical conversation, primarily with each other, but also in relation to first order theology. In practice the first order theology is often unexamined or introduced as anecdote. Qualitative research serves to complicate this distinction. Through close and disciplined attention to the theological expression of the Christian community a distinctive and authentic voice, or to be more accurate voices, can emerge (Cameron et al. 2010). The assumption that it is for second order theological work to generate rules and norms becomes
less credible as the designated role and purpose of the theologian is problematized by the realization that critical reflection and issues of normativity are also located within communities as much as they might be in professional theologians. The theologian who engages in qualitative research therefore almost inevitably finds themselves acting as an arbiter between theological voices generated through fieldwork and those external theological sources that form the substance of academic debate and reference. Doing qualitative research as a theologian is also in itself a theological task.

Qualitative research makes the questions “what is theology?” and “how is it done?” much more complicated. The slippery 3D game of chess that develops around theology and qualitative research, however, becomes much more serious when the idea of God is introduced. The word “theology” in a sense brings a polite edge to the debates. It hides the real sticking point with the pretense that what is being discussed is something to do with academic disciplines when, to be frank, it is not and it never was. The really awkward truth is that theology and qualitative research are uneasy bedfellows because of conflicting approaches to God. This is laid bare if we ask: Is it possible to learn anything about God using qualitative empirical methods? Pressing such a question reveals the parting of the ways. It seems a crude and an inappropriate question to introduce. Some theologians might object to the suggestion that God might be “seen” in qualitative data because this appears to bypass notions of revelation (Webster 2012). Others, however, might have chosen to adopt qualitative methods precisely because they believe that in the depth of human experience, and in particular among the marginal and those who suffer, the divine is uniquely to be found. The turn toward new sources of theology is often motivated by the sense that the canon of doctrinal theology has been dominated by white male authors and that tradition has served to exclude the voices of women and the marginalized. Qualitative research becomes then a method that opens up new directions in theological study while at the same time disrupting previous positions. While this is a liberationist journey driven by critical theory what makes it theological is what this process says of God, i.e. that God is present and revealed in and through the experiences of particular groups and individuals. Once again, the awkwardness around theology and qualitative research is linked to the God question. When theology is seen as a reference to an academic discipline, or a cultural expression of belief, things are complex, but this complexity is not really insurmountable. It is the claim that something that is called theology is basically about God that rests at the heart of the uneasy relationship.

More than Just Data

The claim that qualitative research can be a means to generate knowledge of God is uncomfortable. One reason for this lies in the word “empirical.” The assumption in qualitative methods is that it is possible through interviews and participant observation and other forms of data gathering to observe something; of course, at the heart of all of this there is the one doing the observing: the researcher. It is the researcher who interprets and chooses and edits material. Qualitative research is by its nature subjective rather than objective. It is perhaps closer to being an art than a science. It uncovers meaning rather than measuring numerical trends. Having said all of this, the claim that using these means it is possible to say something about God feels on the face of it to be wrong. God, it is argued, can’t be seen or observed or recorded and transcribed. It is then much more comfortable to say that what can be recorded
are the beliefs and experiences of communities and individuals. According to this view we can speak with confidence about God as an agent in the lives of the Church we are studying when expressing the views of this community or the individual we are interviewing as long as this view is that of the interviewee. What we cannot do is come to a judgment that this experience and these beliefs are actually knowledge of God. This approach then denies theology a normative role in relations to questions of the divine. Such an approach in effect returns to the notion that theology is really only data and we retreat to our separate rooms for the night.

Interestingly, where those who have drawn deeply from the social sciences are reluctant to consider the God question, except as a part of the data, many theologians have no such problems. Theologians of all kinds appear to have few or no worries about saying things about God, often with remarkable certainty; in fact, debating normative claims about the action and being of God are the bread and butter of the discipline. The move toward qualitative research presses on the theologian’s happy acceptance of speech about God and asks: “Is it possible that we can see God in the lived experience of communities and individuals?” At its heart this is what is at stake in the debate around theology and qualitative research. The awkwardness that is felt by many theologians in this question needs to be understood through the turf wars of modern theological debate. Put simply, the theological world is marked by the trenches and bunkers that have been made by the conflict between liberal and conservative forms of theology (Ford 2005). Liberal theology tended to see human experience as a site for theological knowledge. Conservative theology has tended to prioritize doctrine and propositional truth. Correlation was in essence an attempt to mediate between these two positions to find a middle way (Lindbeck 1984). The proposal that qualitative research might generate knowledge of God is all too easily read through this turf war. On the one hand, there are those who still cling to a liberal position, embracing qualitative research as the means to press further with their preferred approach. For others, qualitative research as a form of theology is seen as being anathema or only acceptable if contained by a clearly defined correlational demarcation.

The contemporary move toward qualitative research among theologians is an attempt to break out of the trenches of previous positions (Healy 2000). Correlation and liberal theology have been replaced by a desire among some to see previous distinctions collapse into one another or, if we like, lie down with one another. The God question has been central to these developments. For those who seek to prioritize voices that have been largely ignored, qualitative research takes on a salvific purpose. Adopting the method of research is, then, itself a theological position that brings about transformation. At its heart this collapses the binary positions generated by correlation, and qualitative research moves from a method to a means of realizing a theological goal. This move arises from commitments around who God is and how God might be apprehended and, above all, what it means to encounter this God. This further complicates what we mean by the word “theology” as it becomes intertwined with the method as a result of the intentions of the researcher. At the same time this method generates data that itself can speak in new ways of God and the world from the perspective of those who previously had not been heard. Qualitative research thus generates a further layer to what it means to say the word “theology.”

Parts of the contemporary theological scene in the UK and in the US has been characterized by a return to scripture and doctrine as an organizing lens (Ford 2005). In particular there has been a renewed interest in Trinitarian and Christological thought as a framework for structuring debates around the Church, wider society, politics, and ethics. Perhaps surprisingly, qualitative research has been adopted by a number of prominent theologians as a
partner to this kind of theological discussion (Healy 2000; Bretherton 2014; Watkins 2021). Here the justification for such a move also relates directly to God, for while the source of doctrinally informed theology is rooted in scripture and revelation, these sources point toward divine agency in the Church and in wider society. Theologians who turn to qualitative research, then, are taking seriously the doctrinally based theological claims that, for instance, God might be present and active in the worship, teaching, and fellowship of a local Church, or indeed that God might be active in creation, or in the beauty of human cultural creativity. Qualitative research then becomes a means to discern divine agency and to explore the gritty reality of the movement of the Spirit in the Church and in the world (Watkins 2021). There is a mischievousness to these kinds of projects, not simply because they collapse correlation, but because they take the claims of doctrinally constructed theology at their word.

**More than Just Ideas**

The uneasy relationship between theology and qualitative research is further complicated by the way in which fieldwork reconfigures and disrupts what is meant by the term “theology” (Swinton and Mowat 2006). Theology that is found in communities and in the lives and experiences of individuals comes in forms and types of expression that are much more varied than a written academic text. Qualitative research draws attention to the embodied and cultural forms that make up theology in lived communities. It is a mistake, however, to see qualitative research as a means by which abstract theological thought can be produced in relation to lived expression and community. Rather, the first move is to realize that theology exists in a variety of forms in, with, and through the life of communities and in a whole range of material and cultural forms; indeed, what the process of fieldwork brings about is the realization that it is in these forms and places that theology actually is alive. Qualitative research takes seriously the notion that it is in the lives of communities and individuals that we find the natural environment for theology where it is energized by the work of the Spirit. At the same time, it is also important to acknowledge that the theological data generated by fieldwork is often ambiguous and sometimes contradictory, and occasionally incoherent. This quite simply reflects the messy nature of theology as it exists in cultural expression and community life. For a discipline that often seeks to create systematic accounts of the divine and of human life this can be perplexing, but the very complexity of lived reality is one of the gifts that qualitative research brings to theological work.

There is a further dynamic that takes place through the discipline of engaging in fieldwork; the theologian themself is transformed (Whitmore 2019). Just as theology is seen as being a great deal more varied than simply academic texts, so also the task of being a theologian becomes an embodied and sensory craft. Researchers sense that they are “on holy ground” when they interview others, or when they share in a community experience. The act of doing qualitative research is, then, experienced as theology, as the method itself brings about an experience that is on the edge of something profound and charged with a sense of the divine. Here again it is God that is fundamental to this transformation of what we mean by theology and what we mean by doing theology. It is not that God does not work in and through the more traditional texts associated with theology, or even that these texts are somehow incidental, or at one remove from life. Rather, what qualitative research draws the theologian toward is the rightful setting for these more abstract reflections. In other words, there is a dynamic
relationship between written academic forms of theology and the lived. Qualitative research rests on this relation for, while it is in the experience and practices of communities that theology appears to be most alive, the research method is designed to generate an account of what is observed. This account will be itself an abstract expression of what has been researched. There are, then, deep affinities when the eventual academic outcome of qualitative research and more traditional forms of theologizing are compared. The mistake, however, is to see the eventual text that is produced as being in some way more theological than the experiences and expressions that shape the lives of individuals and communities.

**Theology and Qualitative Research: Bedding Down Research Design**

Qualitative research produces texts for a reason. When the work is done as theology, this reason is itself theological. As I have been arguing throughout this chapter, this is often much easier said than done. Theology exists in so many different forms. Even more perplexing is the realization that in different places, what we call theology appears to function differently, or at least to connect with thought and action differently. It is worth repeating that qualitative research has become a go-to method for theologians partly because this realization has become more evident and interesting for those working in areas such as, ecclesiology, Christian ethics, mission studies and systematic theology. Theoretical debates in these fields have led the way for many and caused them to dip their toe into qualitative research, and some have dived right in and committed themselves to extended periods of fieldwork. At the same time, what many of us have realized is that when we take the plunge finding a way for theology and qualitative research to rest easily together requires close attention. The main reason for this is that the many layers of what might be called “theology” operate in different ways across every aspect of a project.

How and in what ways theology might be part of research design and implementation requires consideration right from the start and at every significant stage in conducting the research. Theology is not something that can be added at the last minute or sprinkled across the top to make things look right. Close consideration needs to be given to theology all the way through the research process. Every project is shaped fundamentally by the key research questions that are addressed. How these might be theological and, indeed, what exactly is meant by theology in this particular project is a fundamental consideration. The researchers themselves will also need to reflect upon the extent to which their own commitments and beliefs shape the choice of project, and in an ongoing commitment to reflexivity that is fundamental to qualitative research these will need to be returned to at key moments in the project. Closely linked to the research questions and reflexivity is the body of knowledge that forms the backdrop to the research design. Here again the question of how and in what ways the project might make a significant contribution to a specific area of theological knowledge becomes of strategic importance. Theoretical frameworks are obviously fundamental in research design and here also the question of theology comes into play. It is almost certainly the case, however, that a range of theoretical materials will form part of research design and here the questions of how different disciplinary perspectives are related and, in particular, what weight the theological voice might or indeed might not have in the project. There is, it is worth saying, no right answer to this. Different researchers will approach interdisciplinarity in different ways, some arguing that theology is one voice among many and others wanting to insist that it is the organizing and
normative framework. The key element in my view is that time is spent thinking about the theoretical shape of the project and how and in what ways theology is a part, and that this discussion is made explicit in any methodological sections of a thesis or a report.

Fieldwork is always shaped in the first instance by the research questions. If the questions have set out a clear theological orientation or concern, then the methods chosen should reflect this fact. Having said this, the multilayered nature of theology means that it is only through close attention to the lived that key theological themes become clear. Data gathering and data analysis need to be sensitized to the ambiguous and messy nature of theology as it is lived; moreover the different kinds of theological expression that might characterize a fieldwork setting need to all form part of data gathering. Data analysis in qualitative research is built around close attention and listening to the voices and themes that emerge. Here again, being attuned to the possible range of theological voices becomes central. Keeping data analysis theological is a craft. As a project moves to analysis there is often a return to theory. Here theology might not simply be part of the substantive concerns of the project, but also form part of the resources that are drawn into the conversation to bring depth and critique. The return to theory, however, is also shaped by making explicit what the project brings to knowledge. Significantly, how the research says something new or important in theological conversation is particularly important. Closely linked to these academic concerns might be a desire to contribute to the ongoing theological life of a community or particular individuals.

The brief survey of the range of theological concerns that are involved in qualitative research is not meant to be exhaustive. Rather the intention has been to illustrate the complexity that is involved in keeping a close eye on how theology might be considered to be part of the project. The point is that the relationship between theology and qualitative research in practice is complex and multilayered and, if each is to find a way to lie down with the other, there is a great deal of thoughtful preparation that is required.

References