

Practical Theology and Qualitative Research. By John Swinton and Harriet Mowat. London: SCM Press, 2006. 278 pages. \$32.99.

In *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, John Swinton and Harriet Mowat provide a welcome contribution to the ongoing conversation about the relationship between practical theology and qualitative research, an area in which interest is growing more quickly than resources. Their primary goal is to offer a constructive proposal for the integration of practical theology and qualitative research, and they do so in two parts. They begin with a section that situates their work theoretically in relationship to the broader fields of practical theology and qualitative research before offering a constructive proposal based in a form of revised mutual critical correlation. In the next section, they turn to a series of case studies demonstrating the proposed method. While Swinton and Mowat articulate the argument of the book well, their underlying assumptions limit the scope and strength of their proposal. Despite its limitations, though, the book holds promise as a resource for the study of practical theology and qualitative research.

The authors introduce a difficult tension in their goal early on, and that tension remains evident throughout the rest of the book. On the one hand, from an avowedly theocentric perspective, they seek to answer the question of how practical theologians can “faithfully” use qualitative research. On the other hand, Swinton and Mowat also describe their work as offering a critical foundation for the integration of practical theology and qualitative research “in a way which retains the integrity of both disciplines” (viii). Faced with the challenge of accomplishing both of these tasks, the authors err on the side of the former at the expense of the latter by insisting that theology has logical priority over qualitative research and that qualitative research must be “converted” for use in practical theology. The kind of deep change that they describe as conversion seems at odds with a concern for the “integrity” of qualitative research. The authors offer no clear argument here explaining this discrepancy, and thus, they do not address this tension in their goal adequately.

A brief passage from chapter 3, right in the heart of the constructive proposal, demonstrates this tension with particular clarity. Here Swinton and Mowat reaffirm the logical priority of theology and the reality of revelation; at the same time they insist that theology itself is interpretive, changing, and done by fallen, contextually bound human beings (89). The stage seems set for a model in which practical theology and qualitative research are integrated such that the “integrity” of each is truly preserved, in which qualitative research might be used to get at the contextual, interpretive nature of theology itself while still insisting that revelation is real. Instead the authors negotiate this tension by assigning and emphasizing distinct realms within practical theology for qualitative research and theology. Qualitative research can offer no knowledge about such things as the nature of God, the cross, resurrection, or the purpose of the universe; these fall within the realm of revelation and seemingly, by extension, of theology. The authors suggest that qualitative research *does* provide insights into the contexts, histories, and traditions in which revelation is interpreted and lived out, and thus into the development of practices in response to revelation. Setting up the division of labor in this way leads to the conclusion that practical theology can utilize qualitative research to ensure that “Christian practice is in correspondence to the event of God’s self-communication” (91). Swinton and Mowat find a place for the “faithful” use of qualitative research, but only at the cost of making it conceptually dependent on theology as a component of practical theology. Practical theology remains the application of truth derived from somewhere else, and qualitative research becomes a tool used in such application. The authors certainly offer a workable model with its own virtues, but they do not achieve the stated goal of integrating the two disciplines in a way that protects the integrity of each.

This failure is connected to the book’s basic assumptions, some named and many, unfortunately, unnamed. Swinton and Mowat repeatedly refer to “theology” as though its meaning were straightforward and universally agreed upon, as something that has a single, “essential” perspective on knowledge, truth, and reality (76). As they make clear at various points throughout the book, this perspective includes, among other things, a realist ontology and a foundationalist epistemology. In similar fashion, several terms that play key roles in the book’s argument, such as “faithfully,” “conversion,” and “sanctification” are used without careful explication of their meanings. Several other operative assumptions also deserve naming: that what it means to be human is to be a meaning-maker; that human experience is not a locus for revelation; that “theology and religious experience are communicated primarily within narratives” (31). While each of these is defensible in its own right, their presence as assumptions weakens the argument of the book. Moreover, their prominent role in the argument of the book means that those who do not share these assumptions will have difficulty in adopting the framework that the authors propose. Those turning to this book for its constructive proposal for integrating practical theology and qualitative research should do so aware of the assumptions at work.

Despite its limitations, the book has many strengths and holds promise for a number of audiences and uses. First of all, for those who share its underlying assumptions, the constructive pro-

posal may prove highly useful. But even for those who cannot accept the assumptions on which the work depends, the book holds promise in several ways. Perhaps most of all, despite the fact that the authors eschew the task of writing an introductory textbook on practical theology and qualitative research, this book could serve well in that role in a seminary or in other settings of theological education. Professionals engaged or interested in the practice of ministry would also be well-served by reading this book. It carefully situates itself within the fields of practical theology and qualitative research, and in so doing inductively (if not comprehensively) introduces the reader to both fields. Moreover, Swinton and Mowat write with an eye toward bringing the two fields together with attention to such issues as reflexivity, epistemology, and methodology. The inclusion of case studies moves beyond theorizing and offers specific examples of what the integration of practical theology and qualitative research could produce. Readers are not left to wonder what good this proposal might do; they can see for themselves and judge accordingly. Moreover, in the authors' clear articulation of both their understanding of practical theology and the pitfalls they see in its use of qualitative research, they offer an opening for critical conversation around these key questions.

Practical Theology and Qualitative Research provides a well-thought, well-articulated model for the integration of practical theology and qualitative research. It does fail to avoid subsuming one discipline under the other, and it operates with a number of unstated assumptions. These shortcomings will limit the audience who find the book's constructive proposal helpful as it stands, but they do not diminish its value for other purposes, particularly as a way into complex and important discussions about the relationship between theology and the social sciences, and more specifically between practical theology and qualitative research.

Bradley J. Daugherty
Vanderbilt University