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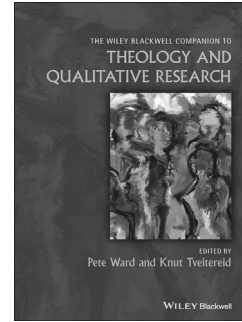
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Pete Ward and Knut Tveitereid (eds.)
**The Wiley Blackwell Companion
 to Theology and Qualitative
 Research**

Wiley Blackwell, 2022, 541 pp.

Reviewed by Auli Vähäkangas
 Professor in Practical Theology, University of Helsinki.



This colossal book was my companion during the past summer in my summer cottage and evoked both frustration and delight. The uniting factor between the contributors is the Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network and its conferences in the UK and the USA. I have once attended the Durham conference but position myself as an outsider to this network. The editors of this volume, Pete Ward and Knut Tveitereid, organize the annual Durham conference and are professors in practical theology in Norwegian universities (Ward also in Durham). The book implicitly carries an understanding that all theology is Christian theology, and that theology is linked to local churches. This position should have been explicitly expressed in the introduction and problematized in the chapters.

The book is marketed as a: “unique introduction to the developing field of Theology and Qualitative Research.” I do not understand that there is a field called theology and qualitative research nor do I see it as something new or developing. I rather see that qualitative theological research has existed for a long time. Thus, the book is a good introduction to those coming from the field of systematic theology and new to the use of empirical research methods. The book also claims

that previously theologians who used qualitative methods were dominated by the method and did not show their expertise as theologians. Many practical theologians have been using qualitative methods and had theological analyses from their data also before this volume.

Moreover, the introduction does not define some of the key words used in the title of the book. After reading the introduction I still wondered: How is theology defined? What is the relationship between theology and practical theology? Furthermore, how are lived theology and contextual theology understood and how are they connected to the other discussions in the book? It is stated that the writers have a variety of responses to the questions I posed but some basic definitions (or a few variations of them) would help the reader to understand what the volume will cover. Additionally, the book should aim to address a clear question or purpose. The only aim I could find in the introduction is: “What the chapters in the book represent is a convergence around the epistemological and methodological issues that arise in the intersection between theology and qualitative research.” Even the verbs used in this statement are very descriptive and it is not clear what the purpose is.

Part I: Naming the Field gives some answers to the questions but does not actually name the field as such. This part is remarkably diverse and gives various empirical examples of how to utilize qualitative methods in (practical) theology. The chapters are interesting but after reading them I did not have any clearer understanding of the basic concepts and how they are used. Additionally, I did not learn what the new contributions are to this “developing” field.

Part II: Theology and Qualitative Research as Forms of Knowledge made for pleasant reading. In this section, answers (in plural, I did not expect a unified voice) were provided to some of my questions. Some writers in this section, like John Swinton, repeat what they have written elsewhere but make clear contributions to the epistemological and methodological issues. The gem of the section is Tanya Riches’ chapter, which shows the complexities of researching religious experiences and focusses on the positionality of the researcher and on the coproduction of knowledge between participants, researcher and reader. The second highlight for me was Tone Stangeland Kaufman’s chapter on reflexivity. Here, she defines various aspects of reflexivity and gives useful examples of how, in her own research, she has tried to make implicit aspects explicit. Riches was new to me but Kaufman’s work is not. Both contributions encouraged me to follow their research in the future.

Part III: Theology and Qualitative Research: Continuities and Discontinuities contains empirical and methodological chapters and introduces a variety of new concepts and examples of qualitative research in fields of study such as Biblical studies and World Christianity. Nice chapters, but

they did not answer my questions about the purpose of the book. I have followed studies on World Christianity for years and qualitative research is not so new as this volume suggests.

Part IV: The Empirical Turn in Practical Theology is more coherent and focusses on subdisciplines of practical theology in various contexts. Some of them, like Ulla Schmidt’s chapter, are pedagogically written and could be read even on master’s level. Other chapters contribute more to the understanding of subdisciplines, analysing the role of qualitative research in pastoral care or Christian education. Interesting and professionally written chapters but not novel contributions as such.

Part V: The Practice of Theology and Qualitative Research is a more methodological section. It contains stimulating chapters which are useful for example to doctoral researchers seeking responses to urgent methodological issues. Most chapters in this section deal with established methodologies and only few introduce more recent contributions, such as collaborative research or visual ethnography. The structure of the section is also better than in the previous ones. Moreover, the chapter titles are informative, which helps to follow them better. Or in the case of these larger handbooks, to find the chapters that one wants to read.

Part VI Responses and Dissent is the concluding section. If I understand it correctly, the writers of this section are not part of the Ethnography and Ecclesiology Network, and thus their contributions are coming from the outside. The chapters discuss qualitative research from lived theology, ethnography, ecumenical research, Romanian churches and Christological perspectives and only one of

them states it is seeking new directions in theology and qualitative research. The writers of this concluding section come from US, Singapore, Romania and Norway. Interestingly, the first three writers are all from the US and other contexts are represented by a single author. The writers represent at least sociology, Early Christianity, systematic theology and practical theology. I wonder how and why these particular scholars were selected? The only big name among the authors of this section is professor emerita Bonnie Miller-McLemore and her argument is that there is no need for qualitative research in theology. Why ask someone who is not in favour of qualitative research to comment on this volume? The problem with this section is that it does not summarize the book but rather introduces new openings at the end of a book, which itself is not coherent. A better option would have been a detailed conclusion by the editors to summarize the contributions and analyse their value for theology and qualitative research.

Various contexts of (practical) theology are introduced throughout the book but there is no proper analysis of how these contexts influence the understanding of practical theology. Current issues in practical theology such as decoloniality/postcoloniality could have received deeper analysis. It is a joy to see contributions from the Global South, nevertheless their voice is not very prominent; their chapters seem to represent the “other”.

The book aims to address epistemological and methodological issues on the intersection between theology and qualitative research. The epistemological aim is not reached satisfactorily whereas the methodological aim is reached more adequately. One reason might be that

epistemologies are linked to disciplinary borders as well as to denominational traditions, which are not openly analysed in this book. Some of the empirical chapters contribute either to the epistemological discussion and/or to the methodological discussion, others just describe interesting case studies without connection to the aim of the book.

One problem while planning this book seems to be that the editors wanted to include all members of an existing network in a single volume. A book needs more of a proper purpose to be beneficial. The *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research* seeks to discuss everything connected to theology and qualitative research in a one volume. The book would have worked better if it had a clear purpose and those contributions which do not address this purpose had been excluded. The main title and subtitles do not help the reader to grasp what it is about. Editors could have written introductions to each section: this would have helped the writers to focus on the specific topic of that section. Furthermore, the same or similar themes are repeated in various sections, which are not clearly divided. More informative titles, a deeper introduction and conclusion would have made this book more valuable to readers.

As a conclusion, I had strong feelings while reading this book. And even though the book is not very coherent, it does contain excellent contributions which I will use both in teaching and in future writings. Additionally, I will suggest our university library to buy a copy for the benefit of our students.