PART ONE

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES
CHAPTER ONE

ESTABLISHING TRUTH FROM PARTICIPATION AND DISTANCIATION IN EMPIRICAL THEOLOGY

Jaco S. Dreyer

SUMMARY

This chapter discusses the methodological opposition between qualitative and quantitative research in empirical theology. It is argued, on the basis of Ricoeur’s hermeneutical theory of the dialectic of participation and distanciation, that a broad hermeneutical understanding of participation and distanciation implies that all research, whether quantitative or qualitative, is characterised by both participation and distanciation. It is further argued that the dialectical tension between participation and distanciation should be maintained in all empirical research endeavours. This tension could be maintained by developing reflexivity in the threefold sense that Bourdieu uses the term: by reflecting on our own prejudices, by being part of scientific communities that help us to reflect on our prejudices, and by reflecting on our scientific practices themselves. This all forms part of learning the craft of research and developing a scientific habitus.

INTRODUCTION

The title of this chapter, *Establishing truth from participation and distanciation in empirical theology*, is certain to raise a few eyebrows. *Establishing truth?* Despite the political confidence in ‘establishing truth’, as evidenced by the many truth commissions that are set up in different parts of the world to establish truth with regard to human rights and other abuses, the search for truth—and even the idea of truth—has been discredited in philosophical and postmodern circles. Posel concludes in this regard: ‘From a philosophical point of view, the credibility of truth has been seriously destabilised’ (Posel, 2004: 3). Should we not abandon the idea of truth as an illusion?

I suggest that we do not give an affirmative answer to this question too hastily. The overriding goal of scientific inquiry is often stated as the search for ‘truth’ or ‘truthful knowledge’ (Mouton, 1996, 2001).