The growing use of empirical methodology in practical theology and other theological disciplines the last years has raised the question: What qualifies the use of such methodology as theological? For obvious reasons such questions are seldom discussed in ordinary textbooks on empirical methodology written by social scientists. Those who are looking for more theologically oriented approaches will find the two books very valuable. Even if they are different in their themes and scope, they both insist on a theological perspective. The books also share authors, as the two authors of the second book are among the five authors of the first book. The books thus are results from a fruitful cooperation between several English researchers with a mixed confessional background based at Heythrop College in London and the Oxford Centre for Ecclesiology and Practical Theology at Ripon College, Cuddesdon.

In *Talking about God in Practice* the authors argue for action research as a fruitful approach for practical theology. As action research has been developed by social scientists, it means that researchers are working together with participants in an organization in order to solve problems or improve practice. The book reflects four years of research conducted by a group of researchers working with parishes, dioceses, and faith-based agencies. During this period the group developed an approach called “Theological Action Research” (TAR). TAR is conducted through a partnership process between an insider team from the organization studied and an outsider team of researchers. Through the gathering of data from the organization and a reflective process involving both the insider and the outsider team, certain practices in the organization are researched and reflected upon, in order to renew theology and practice in the organization.

Because the book gives a detailed presentation of the different stages and aspects of the TAR process, it might serve as a handbook for those wishing to engage in similar processes. The book also presents examples of projects the researchers have been engaged in. These examples include theological action research in a parish, in a diocese and with a faith-based agency.
Most of the elements in the research process presented in the book are well known from other versions of congregational development. What distinguishes TAR from other concepts for congregational development is the insistence on the theological character of the process. The theological aspect is not only a framework or one step among other steps. On the contrary, the process seeks to be “theological all the way through” (p. 145). This means working with practices and self-understanding of the organization in an explicit theological perspective. As theology is often only implicit, TAR aims at empowering people with a language with which to speak about faith and practice.

As an important tool, TAR introduces the distinction between “the four voices of theology”, i.e. normative theology (Scripture, creeds, official church teaching), formal theology (the theology of theologians), espoused theology (the theology embedded within a group’s articulation of its beliefs) and operant theology (the theology embedded within the actual practices of a group). Through the TAR project, operant theology is identified and articulated, and set in dialogue with the other modes of theology. I find this distinction between different voices of theology to be a very useful insight from this project, both theoretically and practically.

The book promises a comprehensive report of the project in the form of a monograph (p. 2). As far as I know, this has not yet been published.

Even if the second book is a rather different book from the first one, both books share the insistence on working theologically. Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission is a rather basic guide for doing research and writing dissertations by using empirical methodology within practical theology. Much of the material in the book is well known from general text books in empirical methodology. What makes the book unique, is the way such methodological insight is linked to the field of practical theology. Behind the book lies the conviction that “Thoughtful research can enable ministry and mission to achieve greater faithfulness” (p. xiii).

The book leads the reader through the different stages of a research process, from designing the research through the use of empirical methods like participant observation, interviews and focus group to writing and editing a dissertation. Through concrete advice and illuminating examples, the authors draw from their own experience as researchers and supervisors. The book would be very suitable for methodology courses in practical theology, and as a resource for students and supervisors.

Neither of the books is theoretically sophisticated. Their strength lies primarily in the clear and practical way they introduce students and researchers to the different steps in research processes. The insistence on working theologically, in the service of ministry and mission, is also important. For everyone