

BOOK REVIEW

Clare Watkins and James Butler. 2026. *Christian Faith and Christian Learning. A Theological Action Research Account*

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Reviewed by Felix Eiffler

Clare Watkins and James Butler present with this book a theological-action-research-oriented project they conducted on eight sites of Christian formation and learning within British Methodism.

The book consists of three parts. Part 1 (“The problem with Christian learning and a theological action research response”) offers a theoretical introduction “to help the reader orientate themselves to the research described in the main body of the book” (13) and encompasses three chapters.

The first chapter reflects on the discourse on Christian learning and discipleship and the authors “have had a sense that what is most often being described in these works ... doesn’t quite ‘fit’ with what we were hearing and seeing ›on the ground” (15). Watkins/Butler observe that the topic of discipleship and lay vocation “has too readily and uncritically reached education and learning as *the* practical response” (26) and “this ecclesial revisioning is viewed is too often that of the professional or clergy educator” (26). The problem lies within an interpretation of the Christian tradition primarily (and sometimes exclusively) through the lens of adult education and in doing so, neglecting a profound theological approach to questions of spiritual formation (prayer, holiness, etc.). Similarly, the description of the church as a learning community falls short of genuine theological descriptions of church as the body of Christ, etc.

The second chapter asks about the *propria* of Christian learning and formation: “What are the theological realities – realities of Trinitarian presence and agency – at play within the practices and understanding of Christian learning?” (39) For this attempt they turn first to contemporary research on Jesus’ own way of teaching according to the Gospel texts as well as to patristic and medieval writers like Augustine and Aquinas. Central to their quest is Matt. 23.8 (“Call no-one teacher”). The authors are surprised how central this idiom was for pre-modern thinkers and

how little it is regarded in contemporary concepts of Christian pedagogy. In line with Augustine and Aquinas, for Watkins/Butler the basic assumption about Christian pedagogy, understood as “faith learning” (40), is the “identification of Christian learning and truth with growth in holiness” (49). Central topics to a growth in holiness are to grow in the three graces of faith, hope and love through which God should be worshipped. By this, the goal of faith learning is to know (the truth of) God and through him anything else. In other words: Such learning is “orientated towards the sharing of divine life and participation in God” (51). Key to faith learning is to reflect on divine and human agency in it and to discover the importance of God’s activity (as the *one* teacher of Matt. 23.8) that enables learning in the first place. The term “faith learning” is “an attempt to describe those often unseen, unmanaged, and under-celebrated moments of learning towards holiness that we were recognising in the experiences we heard about” (52).

The idea and theory of theological action research (Clare Watkins calls it “ethnography of faith”⁹) is introduced in chapter 3 and its potential for faith learning. Theological action research can be summarised as “an account which seeks to hear multiple theological voices together, recognizing the inherent interrelatedness of the themes of belief, action, agency, and God’s work” (59). Watkins/Butler describe the tendency of practical theological accounts to be “either overly pragmatic accounts of how to improve practice with little reference to formal and normative voices of theology, or they become overly pristine accounts of practice which fail to take account of lived practice’s sinful, flawed, and pilgrim state” (62). To engage with this challenge the authors unfold the central characteristics of theological action research, which are “a commitment to theology in four voices; the centrality of the conversational method; a theology of disclosure; a participatory and collaborative approach; and focusing on the renewal of practice and formal theology” (60). The chapter also sketches the processes and practices that shaped the research of the study in working with eight sites over the course of four years and outlines a typical theological action research circle.

Part 2 of the book (chapters 4–11) is entitled “Faith learning, agency, and eschatology. A theological action research journey with sites of practice” and offers a comprehensive account of the actual research that was undertaken. Each chapter focuses on a specific research site and as “the chapters progress, there is a certain ‘snowballing’ of key themes” (77) and by this the concept of “faith learning” emerges and is developed with growing clarity. The authors warn against considering part 2 only as the “data chapters”, because this would foster a disintegration of theological

9 See Watkins, Clare, *Disclosing Church: An ecclesiology learned from conversations in practice*, London/ New York 2020, 28–9.

theory and faith practice, which the idea and methodology of theological action research aim to overcome. According to Clare Watkins'¹⁰ understanding of theological action research it is an "assumption of integration; the theology embedded in what people say about their beliefs and practices and what they do can be attended to as proper elements of the complex conversation between them and the formal and normative theological accounts" (63).

The themes and aspects of the research and reflection of the eight Methodist's sites of co-research (two Methodist congregations, two theological colleges, a Learning Network, a training centre for rural churches and Christians, a Learning Circuit and a Leaders and Preachers course), where faith is lived and learned encompass topics like "faith is for practice", "deep conversation", "learning taking place through doing", "being present and being wordless", "spirituality as practical care and love of all", "agency and service in faith learning", "(mis)match of lay and ordained learning", "learning as cooperation with the Holy Spirit", "lay and clergy pedagogical dynamics", "the expectation of divine agency in faith learning", "resourcing learning", "growing in confidence", "people as *the* resource for faith learning", "contextual interconnectedness as learning", "practical pneumatology", "spirituality of faith learning and discernment", "the quotidian as the fabric of faith learning", "momentary learning" etc.

The third part of the book ("Re-figuring church for God's teaching. A call for a radical reimagining of Christian teaching and learning") summarizes the key findings and learnings from the research and starts to unfold the pedagogical and ecclesiological consequences of the insights gained by the co-research with the eight sites of English Methodism.

The key insights can be summarized as this: faith learning takes place in quotidian situations of attention, love, interruptions (positive and negative) and deep conversations about those experiences in the light of one's own faith and the Christian tradition. Those quotidian places and practices of learning are intertwined, because "it is the foundational practices of Christian love and attention that enable the conversations of faith learning; and it is to these practices that faith learning itself leads" (233). The fruits of "faith learning" are a growing in holiness (which is growing towards a life marked by faith, hope and love), the gift of discernment, confidence, a sense of flourishing, purpose and vocation as well as humility, interconnectedness and awareness for others.

This whole dynamic of "faith learning" is enabled, accompanied and driven by the Spirit and the pneumatic agency. Thus, an "inquiry into Christian learning is, necessarily, an inquiring after the Holy Spirit at work in the whole complex lives of real

¹⁰ See Watkins 2020.

people" (130). According to Watkins/Butler this is at odds with many ecclesial courses that are often based on teaching methods and aims of adult learning. Instead, the authors plead for a new epistemology of faith learning which circles around three perspectives "faith as a kind of knowing; faith knowing as practical-and-contemplative; and possibilities for a revelation-based theology for faith knowing" (239). The term "faith knowing" is described as follows: "Faith knowing is, mysteriously and through grace and the gift of the Spirit, a sharing in God's life – a life which is shaped by a kind of knowing which finds its beginning and end (*telos*) in love, to which our faith and hope draw us" (245).

The book's postscript offers methodological learnings, and in appendices 1 and 2 practical outlines for conducting theological action research are offered.

The broadness of thematic aspects, connections and implications shows the thorough and encompassing endeavour of this book. Even the arrangement of the study reflects this, as it is an ecumenical approach by design, when a Catholic and Anglican researcher work within the field of Methodism.

A critical note is linked with the following quote: "Rather, they are people with a history of seeking to live faithfully, of desiring to follow God, and following their own vocation. There is always a wealth of wisdom 'in the room'" (256). This shows the idealistic assumption of the study, that expects to find many mature and reflected Christians in the congregations, who can talk deeply about their life and faith and are able to interpret their experiences in the light of the Christian tradition. This might be the case for English Methodism, but this is not likely to be the same in other main-line churches in Europe. The question is what does the following claim mean for different ecclesial contexts and realities, where such places might be rare or hard to find: "If this kind of learning is to be supported, then what is needed is close attention to the places where it is most commonly identified – that is the "deep conversations" that bubble up in daily life, and the way into these is through love and care" (207).

About the Reviewer

Felix Eiffler, Head of Research Unit Missional Church Development at the Center for Empowerment Studies, Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg. Contact: felix.eiffler@theologie.uni-halle.de.