

**Prayer as a Research Practice?: What corporate practices of prayer disclose about
theological action research**

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Abstract

Within theological action research the language of discernment has become increasingly important and resonances with spiritual practices such as Lectio Divina have been recognised. This led to practices of corporate prayer being introduced in to the research process. This paper reflects on this experience and identifies key resonances between prayer and theological action research. Through engagement with theological accounts of prayer these resonances are explored turning the question of the place of prayer within theological research on its head. It is not simply that prayer practices add an important dimension to theological action research, but that they actually disclose the ways it is already a practice of prayer. After engaging with potential challenges to such a position through notions of true prayer, control and rigour the paper ends by suggesting that this proposal is not as radical as it first appears, and may instead be an orthodox account of theology.

Key Words

Prayer; theological action research; discernment; corporate prayer; conversation;

There is a suspicion of prayer within practical theology, not whether it is a suitable area for research, but as something which might be part of the research process. This suspicion is not seen in specific criticisms of prayer as a research practice but rather in the lack of engagement with prayer at all. One interesting exception is van Oudtshoorn's paper *Prayer and Practical Theology* where he encourages practical theology to take up prayer as its 'innermode of operations' to critique, name the limits of transformation within practical theology and look beyond praxis to God.¹ He focuses on prayer as petition and no space is given to prayer as discernment or how actual prayer might be incorporated into practical theology. There is, however, an interesting move within practical theology to identify research practices with spiritual practices, which resonates with the starting point of this paper.² Within our work at the University of Reohampton, recognising similarities between our research practices and prayer practices led us to ask what the place of prayer was within theological action research.

This paper will recount and reflect on our experience of introducing explicit practices of prayer into theological action research. I then turn to a theological account of prayer to explore these accounts. As a result the posed question is flipped: Rather than asking if prayer has a place within theological action research, the introduction of prayer discloses that theological action research has the potential to be considered as prayer. This may seem a radical proposal. However it is not an outrageous one. To demonstrate this I will discuss the problems of theological action research as prayer, by thinking about what it means to truly

¹ Andre van Oudtshoorn, 'Prayer and Practical Theology', *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16, no. 2, (2013), pp. 285–303, doi:10.1515/ijpt-2012-0018.

² Nicola Slee, Fran Porter, and Anne Phillips, *The Faith Lives of Women and Girls: Qualitative Research Perspectives*, (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1–12; Catherine Sexton, 'Method as Contemplative Enquiry: From Holy Listening to Sacred Reading and Shared Horizons', *Practical Theology* 12, no. 1, (1 January 2019), pp. 44–57, doi:10.1080/1756073X.2019.1575042; Eileen R. Campbell-Reed and Christian Scharen, 'Ethnography on Holy Ground: How Qualitative Interviewing Is Practical Theological Work', *International Journal of Practical Theology* 17, no. 2, (2013), pp. 232–259, doi:10.1515/ijpt-2013-0015.

pray, and engaging with question of rigour. I will end the paper suggesting that far from the radical proposal this initially seems this may, in fact, be an orthodox account of theology.

Theological Action Research and the Practice of Prayer

This first section is a reflexive account of introducing prayer into theological action research which uses autoethnographic methods to draw on personal experience as a source of data.³ I will begin by locating myself and the projects I'm involved in within the wider development of theological action research. Theological action research was developed by the ARCS team, a collaboration between Ripon College, Cuddesdon and Heythrop College. It developed inductively through the research and resulted in the book *Talking about God in Practice*.⁴ The methodology has been hugely influential, particularly among masters and doctoral students. The 'four voices of theology' that it develops was a particularly helpful framework for me in my own PhD research. This framework recognises that practice, both what people do and what people say (operant and espoused voices) is an important locus of theology and potential revelation alongside scripture and church tradition (normative voice) and academic theology (formal voice). However it was only when I began work at the University of Roehampton with one of the originators, Dr Clare Watkins, that I was fully immersed into the methodology.⁵ I noticed theological action research had continued to develop; there had been tweaks and changes to language and practice, and a deepening of its theological foundations. These were both in response to action and reflection in research and through observing others misunderstanding the process as presented in the book. Particularly

³ Heather Walton, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*, (London: SCM Press, 2014), p. 3; Kim Etherington, *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher: Using Our Selves in Research*, (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2004); Sari Hokkanen, 'Analyzing Personal Embodied Experiences: Autoethnography, Feelings, and Fieldwork', *The International Journal of Translation and Interpreting Research* 9, no. 1, (2017), pp. 24–35.

⁴ Helen Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 2010).

⁵ I am the postdoctoral researcher on two projects funded by the Susanna Wesley Foundation: <https://susannawesleyfoundation.org/>

noticeable was the move from data *analysis* to data *discernment*. While the book identified the importance of conversations of discernment and humility⁶, as a team we developed this further noticing the resonances with the spiritual practices of Examen and *Lectio Divina*. We began to recognise particular virtues of the conversational approach such as humility, confidence of truth telling, loving the other's voice and living with complexity. We also started to be explicit about the place of prayer in reflecting on the data, something which is, perhaps surprisingly, missing from the original account of theological action research.⁷

Talking about God in Practice identifies five characteristics of theological action research: being theological all the way through; theology in four voices; disclosing theology through conversational method; formative of transformation of practice; and formative of transformation in theology.⁸ These founded in a theology of God acting in the world and a particular understanding of revelation. In seeking to discern God's action in the world and be 'theological all the way through' Christian practices of discernment seem an obvious place to turn alongside social scientific methods. However, as we began to reflect on the development of this language and practice of prayer and discernment, we realised that **our** prayer remained personal and private. There were no corporate practices of prayer. While there might be good reasons to be cautious about the introduction of prayer into research, which I will discuss later, we decided, in the spirit of action research, to introduce prayer into the process and see what happened.

Before I turn to explicit examples I will outline the process of theological action research. It is a collaboration between a university 'reflector team' and a local 'reflector team' from the particular organisation, church or group. This seeks to breakdown the researcher-researched

⁶ Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, 57, 66.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 178–79.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 51–60.

paradigm, recognising both teams as having gifts, skills and insights to bring to the research, and as sharing a Christian faith. After initial contact has been made and the teams decide to embark on the research together, the next stage is a training day. Here the local team is introduced to the process and methodology but crucially it includes discerning a research question together. Once the question is discerned a plan is made for data collection. The data is collected (interviews, focus groups etc.) and transcribed. Data discernment begins with each team member reflecting on the data individually. The teams then meet separately to discuss their reflections and then together to name their joint learning.

Training and Discerning the Research Question

The first place where we introduced corporate prayer was the training session. We were mindful of the fact that these groups are often ecumenical and individuals in them may have quite different experiences of prayer. We were also cautious of the way prayer could be used to manipulate and control social situations. We chose to start with a *Lectio Divina* reflecting on the woman at the well from John 4. *Lectio Divina* was chosen for its resonances with the careful and deliberate reading of data we would be encouraging later and the passage was chosen for its conversational and revelatory narrative. The passage was read twice with people encouraged to listen rather than read along. After a time of silence, people were asked to repeat particular words or phrases that had stood out from the passage. The time was brought to a close saying the Lord's Prayer together. *Lectio Divina* opened up a space of prayer and reflection which had a particular shape but didn't dictate how people should reflect, nor ask them to justify their reflections. As people spoke words and phrases that had resonated for them, there was a clear non-linearity to the process. While they jumped around the passage, themes began to emerge as people returned to particular verses or words.

As well as introducing *Lectio Divina* we were attempting to integrate the process of discerning the research question into the training. Discussion and discernment about the question was interspersed throughout the training. It was striking that the non-linearity identified in the prayer time was also recognisable in the training, particularly revealed in the need to jump back and forth between the slides we had prepared.

The *Lectio Divina* prayer was an important part of the training from our perspective and we returned to it a number of times in the session highlighting the echoes with theological action research. In this way it set the tone for the training day. Beginning with prayer was not remarked on by the participants which probably reflects the integrated nature of the spirituality of the practitioner and that prayer would be fairly common in such a meeting. We wondered whether the conversation might include explicit references to the passage or the time of prayer, however, I cannot recall such a moment.

Prayer in the Focus Groups

The second place we introduced prayer was in the focus groups. We noticed that in previous focus groups there was a surprising lack of religious or biblical language. While this might tell us something about the nature of the groups, we realised we had resisted introducing the language in questions, not wanting to hear our own words echoed back to us. Being more explicit about the nature of the research and highlighting the commitment to discern God together enabled the language to be introduced before specific questions and themes were introduced. With one particular focus group I started as follows:

The research we are doing is called theological action research, and really at the fundamental level [...] it's actually about discerning God together, and discerning what God might be saying to congregations, groups, the church as a whole and beyond. And given that setting I wondered whether we could start by saying the Lord's Prayer.

Immediately after this I noticed that people begin to smile and physically relax. Up to that point there had been questions about the nature of the research. After praying the Lord's Prayer I personally felt the atmosphere had changed and people seemed to enjoy starting the conversation. While it would be misleading to suggest that religious and biblical language suddenly appeared in the midst of the group, there were indications that people felt more comfortable to take the conversation in that direction, as people talked about the incarnation and reflected on the work of the Spirit. The end of this focus group was also pertinent. People had arrived late and the focus group had overrun. I was bringing the conversation to a slightly premature end due to needing to catch a train. The discussion went as follows:

Facilitator Great, well, thank you so much all of you for taking the time, I really, really appreciate it. [..]

Jen Thank you.

Wendy Hope you have a safe journey home.

Lorraine Can we close with the Grace?

Facilitator Yes.

And we all said the Grace together. While everyone in the focus group knew each other and it may have been a familiar practice, it seemed to me to be a recognition that this focus group hadn't just been an interesting discussion but had been something more profound as we had tried to listen carefully to each other, and in so doing, to discern God. My thanks had seemed insufficient to end the focus group and this prayer acknowledged that the conversation had been open to and directed by the Holy Spirit.

Of around 12 focus groups we have now begun with prayer, only once has anyone referred explicitly on the place of prayer in the focus group. Reflecting on the place of spirituality in the college where she was studying, she commented:

I love the fact that you start this off by praying, I'm just like, yes. [...] we start by handing it over to God and we also, we can learn all these things when we trust God to be in them, and that just gives it a whole other dimension.

The participant appreciated that, by beginning with prayer, God had been given a central place within the focus group. God was acknowledged as an actor within the focus group and trusted to be present in the conversation. For the participant it brought a 'whole other dimension' where God is present and active in the learning.

Having introduced prayer at the beginning of the focus group, I wondered how we could actively encourage discernment during the focus group. Inspired by a conversation with Amy Roche who had introduced silence into her focus groups for her doctoral research, because of an awareness of different learning styles, I wondered whether it might also give space for reflective prayerful discernment. In the middle of the focus groups I have suggested that we sit silently and reflect on the conversation so far. After a couple of minutes people were invited to share anything or reflect anything back to the group. While there were no lightning bolts of revelation, it was noticeable that the conversation continued in a quite a different direction from where it was heading before the pause. In two focus groups people had obviously been looking out of the window into the countryside and reflected on the importance of the location.

Prayer in the Data Discernment

I have already commented on the move from data analysis to data discernment, due to the theological and epistemological commitments of theological action research, and in light of

this we also introduced the *Lectio Divina* prayer at the beginning of the reflector meeting. In one particular reflector meeting, I chose a passage of scripture which had had particular resonance for me during data discernment. This potentially gave me the power to shape the discernment in a particular way. Again, we felt *Lectio Divina* set the tone of the meeting around careful listening to each other and the Holy Spirit, but despite my worries, it didn't seem to set the agenda in terms of content. In fact there was no explicit reference back to the time of prayer or the passage chosen throughout the session. Again the prayer and conversation felt in continuity. The prayer didn't feel incongruous and openly acknowledged our commitment that we were Christians, from a variety of traditions, coming together with the hope of discerning something of God through the data. The practices were complementary and even overlapping. It could of course be argued that those familiar with regular practices of prayer were able to compartmentalise the practice from the process of data discernment; but as a participant in this process, this was not my sense. While the *Lectio Divina* practice wasn't explicitly referred to in the conversation that followed, it was requested that the passage of scripture chosen was pinned up on the wall next to the agenda of the meeting and the research question, and one of the reflectors later took the passage away with them to reflect further.

Preliminary Reflections

Beginning the different meetings with prayer was a way of naming the space. This happens at a number of levels. Prayer would have made the space comfortable for some, introducing a practice which was familiar and associated with church and faith. There may be situations where prayer would lead to discomfort and restrict the conversation, but that was not the experience. In contrast to Elizabeth Jordan's account of being both a priest and researcher I

chose to use the prayer to encourage mutuality and discernment.⁹ Prayer also shaped the space to encourage us to discern God together. This was identified as bringing a ‘whole other dimension’ by one participant, encouraged another to ask to pray the Grace. Even if this is simply a habit from their own prayer meetings or Bible studies, this still demonstrates that the space was being identified with those kinds of activities. This is not simply a methodological point about putting people at ease but a theological point about the space being created. By naming the space in this way God can be recognised by all involved as an agent in the conversation.

In all three places where prayer was introduced it appeared in continuity with the conversation. It was natural to move between prayer and conversation. The only anxiety experienced was in one group who worried about their non-Christian colleague, however they were completely happy with it. Given this continuity it is somewhat surprising that there was little cross-over in terms of content. Very few references were made to praying together or to the passages of scripture used. Given our sense that this was an important practice, and reflected a deep commitment within theological action research, should we be concerned that it wasn’t explicitly referred to again? It might suggest prayer was compartmentalised, or insignificant in the process, but it also suggests that it didn’t overtly control or direct the conversation either; the prayer didn’t assert itself over the discussion, nor did the passage become a restrictive text. While I am not able to draw any explicit conclusion, given the sense of continuity, I will follow a particular thesis; that this demonstrates something of the integrated nature of prayer within the theological action research process.

⁹ Elizabeth A. Jordan, ‘Friends, Family or Foe? : Fostering Good Relationships between Lay Leaders and the Newly Appointed Ordained Leaders of Anglican Congregations’, (Ph.D., Anglia Ruskin University, 2015), p. 48, <http://arro.anglia.ac.uk/605485/>.

Four practices were introduced, three by the university team and one (saying the Grace) by the participants themselves. It is not surprising that there were resonances between *Lectio Divina* and the conversation – it had been introduced for that reason after all. However, this is still a significant finding – the nature of the prayer times had a lot in common with the nature of the conversation, particularly in their non-linearity and the way the conversation and prayer circled around particular themes. The continuity identified with other practices is also significant. All the practices emphasised and encouraged the attentiveness to God and each other. The Lord’s Prayer and the Grace, are more petitionary in nature. These practices of attentiveness and petition will both be explored further below.

Prayer and Theological Action Research

While all these themes are significant, it is the theological themes that arise from the resonances between the conversations and prayer that I will pursue in this paper by engaging with theological accounts of prayer, in particular the work of Ashley Cocksworth.¹⁰ In doing this I will turn the initial question of the paper on its head: Having begun by asking the place of prayer in theological action research, I suggest that introducing prayer has actually disclosed something about the nature of theological action research; that it has the potential to be prayer.

Conversation and Revelation

Theological action research has a particular commitment to conversation: Conversations between reflector teams, both in planning and discerning the data; conversational approaches to data collection; and the conversations of disclosure between the four voices. The resonances above, particularly the non-linear and circular nature of returning to themes are characteristic of these conversations. The metaphor of conversation for prayer is therefore a

¹⁰ Ashley Cocksworth, *Prayer: A Guide for the Perplexed*, (London: T&T Clark, 2018).

helpful place to turn. Cocksworth spends significant time exploring prayer as conversation by engaging with *On Prayer*, written by Evagrius, a fourth century desert mystic. He begins by problematizing this, perhaps all too familiar, metaphor pointing out that prayer-as-conversation can't simply be seen as the relationship between human pray-er and God: this isn't a back-and-forth of talking and listening but instead 'a messy 'polyphony' of voices intersecting each other in ways that break the mould of what would ordinarily count as conversation.'¹¹ Expanding this he develops the Christological understanding of prayer-as-conversation noting that prayer is both a gift from God and that God prays 'in' the pray-er. Prayer is being 'caught up in the Son's eternal conversation with the father.'¹² He then states:

Prayer is about clearing the idle clutter of the mind in order to be attentive to the divine conversation that is already occurring 'in' us. For Evagrius, it would seem that the human pray-er is more like an active 'eavesdropper', [...] who 'listens in' on the divine conversation already in play.¹³

Cocksworth then points out that for Evagrius conversation meant 'keeping company with' and suggests that what Evagrius means by the conversation of prayer can be summed up in one word as 'union'.¹⁴ For Cocksworth this all points towards the interrelatedness, within Evagrius' writings, of prayer and theology. Prayer is more than individual practices, it is 'a continuous, unceasing event'¹⁵ integrating all of life. This leads to the conclusion that, at least in Evagrius' writing, and in contrast to today's understanding of theology, 'We are able to know God, and speak theologically of God, because we are in dialogue with God.'¹⁶

¹¹ Ibid., 36.

¹² Ibid., 37.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 38.

¹⁶ Ibid., 39.

Here, the resonances with theological action research are striking. The conversation of disclosure between the four voices, which vitally within theological research is embodied in actual conversations within and between reflector teams, is at the heart of theological action research. There is a ‘complexity of theological voices’¹⁷ which are ‘a dynamic of distinct, but interrelated and overlapping ‘voices’¹⁸ where ‘We can never hear one voice without there being echoes of the other three.’¹⁹ While not claiming that these voices can be equated with the conversation between Father and Son, they do resonate with the sense of prayer being a ‘polyphony’ of voices described by Cocksworth, with theological action research laid out as a particular way of ‘eavesdropping’ or in theological action research’s phrase, being attentive to, this conversation. Cocksworth notes the importance of scripture for Evagrius, and suggests that much of this dialogue would be through meditating on scripture. Similarly he suggests that *On Prayer* was intended, not just for the transfer of information but to draw the reader into prayer, and therefore was itself a locus of theology and revelation – albeit also human, finite and potentially flawed. In this way participation in prayer relies on these loci of revelation much in the same way as theological action research. The conversation is one that the co-researchers attempt to embody, always seeing these different voices as loci of theological truth and revelation.

All of this returns us to a core conviction of theological action research, ‘that practices are bearers of theology, [which] is based on a prior fundamental theological belief in the activity of God in the world.’²⁰ ‘The primary ‘actor’ for theological action research is God, as Trinity, participating in the life and thinking of the Church.’²¹ The attentiveness of

¹⁷ Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, 56.

¹⁸ Ibid., 53.

¹⁹ Ibid., 54.

²⁰ Clare Watkins, *Disclosing Church: Generating Ecclesiology Through Conversations in Practice*, (London: Routledge, 2020), chap. 3.

²¹ Ibid.

theological action research is towards the action of God within the practices, words, norms and traditions of the Christian faith embodied in the community – the way in which the community are participating, even if only fleetingly, in the work and life of the Trinity.

As already stated Evagrius' *On Prayer* wasn't just intended to provide teaching about prayer, but to draw the reader into prayer. 'As well as a repository of information about prayer, *On Prayer* becomes a guide into prayer itself and thus into transformative union with God.'²²

Theological action research's characteristic of being formative of transformation of practice relates to this point. The process is not one of gaining knowledge about practice, but in the act of deep attentiveness to the four voices practice is transformed. This is named in *Talking about God in Practice* as related to the act of 'discovering language for the hidden depths of what we do'²³ but this more than simply the power of education. It is the very nature of revelation, of participating in a conversation which, through the four voices framework, is seeking to eavesdrop on the conversation and action of the triune God; the encounter through which we are changed.

Theological Action Research as having the potential of being prayer

Noticing the resonances in practice between prayer and the process of theological action research led to exploring these resonances theologically. These resonances between Cocksworth's analysis of Evagrius' work and the convictions of theological action research give weight to my proposal that rather than finding the place of prayer in theological action research, the introduction of practices of prayer has disclosed the way theological action research may already be, or at least have the potential to be, prayer.

²² Cocksworth, *Prayer*, 25.

²³ Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, 58.

For much of the history of the church there would be nothing particularly controversial about this statement. As Cocksworth affirms, ‘Theology, classically understood, does not seek merely to speak about God but its ultimate end is to delight in the glorification of God. In constant dialogue with prayer, the study of theology becomes more obviously formative: it becomes itself a sort of prayer, a spiritual practice.’²⁴ This raises an important point about practical theology. If within practical theology there is a commitment to both theology and practice of faith, and indeed theological reflection, this must, surely, take place within a confessional tradition. By this it is implied that some sense of divine action in the world must be anticipated and some form of revelation is to be anticipated. To suggest that the practical theological task can be undertaken without prayer, through a scientific approach, might therefore be an over confidence in the academic task to discern God, and cut itself off from the very practices which have historically been seen as central to that task.

Truly Praying

I am not, however, naive to the problem of naming theological action research as a practice of prayer, or the potential questions of rigour and bias which arise from doing so. Prayer is open and vulnerable to abuse, control, undisclosed bias, and human sinfulness in the same ways that all research practices are. This opens up a huge question, which we can only briefly explore, into what constitutes true prayer. Herbert McCabe asserts,

The notion of the needy creature simply appealing to his Creator is not merely an inadequate account of prayer, it is not prayer at all. It involves an initiative on the part of the creature, building a city and a tower that will reach up into the heavens. All true

²⁴ Cocksworth, *Prayer*, 3.

prayer is the work of grace, that is to say the initiative is from the Father drawing us into communion with his Son.²⁵

Rather than praying the things we think we should pray, McCabe suggests, that true prayer is praying for the things we actually desire. ‘If we are honest enough to admit to our shabby infantile desires then the grace of God will grow in us, it will slowly be revealed to us, precisely in the course of our prayer, that there are more important things that we truly do want.’²⁶

This sounds a neat solution to the problem of prayer, however, it is complicated by Lauren Winner’s work, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*. In her chapter on prayer she takes the diaries of Keziah Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard, a widow and owner of two plantations near Columbia, South Carolina, in the 19th Century.²⁷ Keziah’s prayers are recorded in detail in her diary. Winner carefully describes the way her prayers about the slaves she owns reinforce and are reinforced by a particular worldview which endorses slavery. Slavery and Christianity become complicit in a particular deformation of prayer. Winner reports how ‘disturbing’ it is to read these diaries with her ‘caustic scathing; her desperate desire to send her slaves, and the abolitionists, off to some other country; her piety and her prayer.’

Their prayers resist a binary: We cannot say that the women’s prayers are compromised without remainder just because they were part of slave society. Nor can we say that their prayers were fine merely because they aimed in part to reduce violence. By itself, to pray for less violence is a good thing. But this petition for decreased violence, less anger, and greater self-control is in fact a prayer that asks God to make the emotional logics of slavery work as the proslavery ideologues

²⁵ Herbert McCabe, *God Matters*, (London; New York: Continuum, 2012), p. 221.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 224.

²⁷ Lauren F Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin*, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2018), pp. 57–94.

believed they should work, and the prayer thus fixes the petitioner more firmly into an evil system.²⁸

While it appears that Keziah is praying from her desires, prayer has been deformed and resists what McCabe asserts about true prayer. Winner turns to the Lord's Prayer pointing out the ways Keziah's prayers are incompatible with it, but instead of a normative 'should', which McCabe suggests is still not 'true prayer', what would need to change for McCabe's assertion that by beginning with real desires they are changed by the grace of God?

Resisting Control and Dispossession

Williams and Coakley both turn to contemplative prayer as the means to overcome this human desire to control. Here, in part, there is an answer to the question of transformed desire; prayer which is open to the mystery and unknownness of God,²⁹ and which is open to the challenge and risk from other voices allows this growing in grace.³⁰

Again the resonances with theological action research are striking. It begins with the 'desires' of the local group -their questions, struggles, joys and hopes- from which the research question is formed. The openness to dispossession identified in contemplative prayer is similar to theological action research's own commitment to conversations and the four voices.

This commitment to conversational approaches is based in a theology of revelation and truth that not only recognizes the variety of authentic theological voices (including those that do not use words), but also recognizes that there are particular skills and wisdom involved in allowing these different and distinct voices to be heard

²⁸ Ibid., 85–86.

²⁹ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 8–12.

³⁰ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'*, (New York, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 48–49.

together, and in conversation with one another. An appropriate method has to be worked out, which not only allows a proper place to the variety of theological voices, but also enables a genuine openness to hearing those voices, even when they might seem strange or contradictory.³¹

The openness and humility to hear the voices which challenge and convict, as well as to affirm and encourage, is at the heart of the conversation envisaged. This is not to say that this is always the case, and indeed it is noticeable that there are particular virtues and postures which are vital to the practice of theological action research, as outlined above.

In light of this discussion, I propose that this sense of theological action research as having the potential of being prayer is grounded, not just in the resonances in practice or the overlap with its conversational convictions, but in the way that it embodies these characteristics of true prayer. These are seen in its starting point of truthful desire; its openness to risk and challenge and the otherness of God; and the intentionality of including and listening attentively to other, often marginalized, voices.

There remains a question of the place of petition, as seen in the Lord's Prayer and the Grace. I have argued that petition is not something to move beyond, but something which is transformed in prayer. Cocksworth, in his discussion of petition and providence follows Tanner's argument that divine and human agency are non-competitive.³² By reading providence through the lens of prayer he shows how prayer reveals the profound intimacy between divine-human relations where God's intimacy and otherness can be known together. It discloses that 'God is not a long way off, but is involved deeply in the complete course of creaturely existence.'³³ Prayer is an intimate experience of how God is at work in the world

³¹ Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, chap. 4.

³² See Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988); Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus Humanity and the Trinity*, (Fortress Press, 2001).

³³ Cocksworth, *Prayer*, 172.

where human agency and God's agency are not comparable. Theological action research begins with an understanding that God is active in the world, therefore petition isn't convincing God to act, but a key way of collaborating with God.

Theological Action Research and the Practice of Prayer revisited

In this final section I anticipate some of the challenges about prayer and rigour before reflecting on theological action research's place within prayer by discussing their ends.

The disclosing nature of specific practices of prayer

One might be tempted to ask why, if theological action research can be practised in such a way that it is actually prayer, do we need explicit practices of prayer at all? This, however, is to ignore the logic of introducing the practices of prayer in the first place. It was in the midst of practice that the resonances were noticed and through introducing explicit prayer practices that something was disclosed about theological action research. Cocksworth's reflections on Evagrius' idea of continuous prayer is helpful here.

'Evagrius saw prayer as a continuous, unceasing event that would integrate times of formal prayer with the work of copying manuscripts, manual labour, chanting the psalmody, meditating on texts and, especially, reading the Bible.'³⁴

While these can be understood as the living-out of an exhortation to 'pray without ceasing' (1 Thes 5:17) they only make sense in the context of the formal prayers of the community. Praying always (Luke 18:1) is identified when punctuated with formal, yet integrated, times of prayer. This suggests that there might be particularly practices of prayer which are more

³⁴ Ibid., 38.

helpful in making these broader connections. The practices engaged in this research were particularly around attentiveness and developing and praying for openness to God.³⁵

The Rigorous Nature of Prayer in Theological Action Research

This also raises the question of rigour. I note in myself a feeling of unease moving from the preciseness of academic norms towards seemingly more subjective prayer practices.

However, in following through on theological action research's confessional foundation that this research is primarily about discerning, together, the ways in which the triune God is at work in our midst, leads us to some difficult commitments. These commitments can appear at odds with a scientific method, borrowed, as much of it is, from the social sciences.

However, what these explicit practices of prayer have disclosed is that the kinds of methods and practices that have been revealed to be most helpful in discernment, have been those which resonate with prayer. Rather than simply borrow these and place them in a secularised methodology, being faithful to the Christian tradition may mean including the practices as well as the written theological tradition, and in-so-doing recognise theological action research as a practice of Christian faithfulness.

Coakley not only sees prayer practices as deeply theological, but as vital.

If one is resolutely not engaged in the practices of prayer, contemplation, and worship, then there are certain sorts of philosophical insight that are unlikely, if not impossible, to become available to one. So it now becomes clear why theology, thus understood, must be a form of intellectual investigation in which a secular, universalist rationality may find itself significantly challenged – whether criticized, expanded, transformed, or even at points rejected. In other words, an Enlightenment-

³⁵ It also opens up questions of the corporate nature of prayer and the spirituality of a group.

style appeal to a shared universal ‘reason’ can no longer provide an uncontentious basis for the adjudication of competing theological claims.³⁶

What this suggests, is that the these particular resonances with prayer potentially make the research process more rigorous, more open to challenge, more honest, and practised in greater humility. This brings a new profundity to the commitment of being theological the whole way through: recognising theological action research as a practice of prayer would make it more theological, not less. This all returns us to neatly Evagrius’ phrase which begins Cocksworth’s own explorations,

61. If you are a theologian, you will pray truly, and if you pray truly, you will be a theologian.³⁷

Not that prayer might set the right environment for theology, or that it should end in prayer and thanks, but that theology itself is a practice of prayer.

The Ends of Prayer and Theological Action Research

I have not intended to set theological action research up as either in opposition to prayer or an alternative to prayer, but to set it in a wider context of prayer as participation in the eternal conversation of Son and Father, as a gift of the Father, and as Christ praying through us, by the Spirit. In this sense, while theological action research’s ends are of transformation of practice and theology, these are small and incremental in comparison to the greater ends of prayer, to which theological action research is a servant; union with God and the redemption of all the creation (Romans 8).

Perhaps, in light of all this, my claim is nowhere near as radical or outrageous as it initially appeared: theological action research is only prayer in the way all of theology should be

³⁶ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 16.

³⁷ Cocksworth, *Prayer*, 23.

prayer. But even to state this is to present a challenge to theology, and, in particular, practical theology, to recognise the theological commitments it embodies and that the kinds of questions it is asking might only be served if incorporated in the practices of the Christian faith and in the midst of the Christian life being lived.