

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Theology as social activity: theological action research and teaching the knowledge of Christian ethics and practical ministry

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## Abstract

Theological Action Research (TAR) is a way of doing and teaching theology and forming students that surmounts the problems associated with both formal theologies and theological ethnographies. Drawing from models of action research developed in other fields, this paper outlines an approach to teaching practical ministry grounded in a collaborative mode of inquiry capable of generating new insights into humanity's relation to God while also engendering the ethical-political powers that give shape to collective life. As a process of what anthropologist Lia Haro calls eth-o-graphy, Christian formation and knowledge production cannot be disconnected from cooperative participation in communities of practice dedicated to this kind of social, ecclesial activity. The paper goes on to describe how the author has begun to implement this TAR model at a Catholic, Jesuit institution, offering some promising preliminary findings on the potential it holds for training ministry students.

**Keywords:** action research; ethnography; pedagogy; theological education; theology and ethics

The title of this essay plays off of John Milbank's seminal book, *Theology and Social Theory*. In that book, Milbank formidably argues that theology is its own social theory and, therefore, not only need not rely on secular social sciences, but can expose their underlying idolatries. Such a view frees Christian theology (and the church) from subservience to the prejudices of modern science in order to look to its own resources for understanding and describing reality and its social relations.<sup>1</sup> And yet even within the field of theology, critiques of this Milbankean view have emerged. Both Kathryn Tanner and Nicholas Healy, each in their own way, have challenged the simplistic notion of culture and the idealistic ecclesiology inherent to Milbank's thesis. No culture is as

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<sup>1</sup>As Milbank contends, 'The pathos of modern theology is its false humility. For theology, this must be a fatal disease, because once theology surrenders its claim to be a meta-discourse, it cannot any longer articulate the word of the creator God, but is bound to turn into the oracular voice of some finite idol, such as historical scholarship, humanist psychology, or transcendental philosophy.' John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd edn (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 1.

insulated and independent, so Tanner avers, as Milbank would seem to suggest.<sup>2</sup> And for Healy, the ideal notions of the church promoted by 'blueprint ecclesiologies' can be misleading and even destructive to the extent that they tend to direct our attention away from the actual practices, structures and activities of existing churches.<sup>3</sup>

The result of these critiques has been a 'turn to ethnography' within theology and theological ethics, with the intention of trying to find a more careful but productive integration of the social sciences and theology so as to provide better insight on the lived nature of belief and to guide more faithful action. For those working in theological field education and contextual education, this shift has been profound. Within seminary and divinity school curricula, particularly in North America, field education and contextual education play a central role in the professional education of students, by providing a setting where they learn through practice.<sup>4</sup> Naturally, field education and contextual education have drawn substantially from the robust research and practices of the field of educational studies, and this has been no less true given the turn to qualitative research in education. That ethnographic studies have greatly assisted in focusing attention on actual congregations and their practices has come as a welcome corrective to the idealised presentations of the church circulating within the discipline. Additionally, the stress on self-reflexivity within qualitative research has enhanced the aim of student formation within field education and contextual education. As a result, field educators and contextual educators have increasingly sought to integrate ethnography into student learning, in concert with a growing trend toward introducing qualitative research courses in seminary and divinity school curricula more broadly.

The contributions of ethnographic research for theological education and formation notwithstanding, within the field of education a lively discussion persists around the use of qualitative research and its aims, possibilities and outcomes. Education scholars influenced by critical and post-colonial theory, as well as by ongoing conversations in the sister discipline of cultural anthropology, have recently articulated what they take to be some persistent limitations and failures of the methodology. Questions about relations of power and neutrality remain, as do concerns about moral production

<sup>2</sup>See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), esp. pp. 38–58.

<sup>3</sup>More than Milbank, Healy contends with Hauerwas' view of the church. One presumes this is because Hauerwas tends to write more directly about the church as a social body, while Milbank tends to focus more on ontology. Nevertheless, Healy's description of 'blueprint ecclesiologies' would seem to apply to Milbank's theoretical ecclesiology. See Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 25–51.

<sup>4</sup>In a North American context, field education and contextual education are used fairly synonymously, though the usage of contextual education is newer. Both arise from a heightened focus on professional education within theological education beginning in the 1960s and thus a focus on practical training that goes beyond the classroom. For a very short account of the origins, development and purpose of field education, see Matthew Floding, 'What is Theological Field Education?', in Matthew Floding (ed.), *Welcome to Theological Field Education!* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), pp. 1–16. The more recent use of 'contextual education' reflects the ongoing influence of educational studies on the discipline of practical ministry. As Elaine Johnson recounts, within the field of educational studies contextual teaching and learning grew out of a grassroots movement of educators (associated with the 1983 study 'A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform' and an initiative launched by the Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) to focus on applied learning in an attempt to remedy the shortcomings of traditional education. A strong emphasis on learning in context and the principle that knowing cannot be divorced from doing characterises this movement. See Elaine B. Johnson, *Contextual Teaching and Learning: What It Is and Why It's Here to Stay* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2002), pp. 1–20.

and the liberative and transformational capacities of ethnography. Having given rise to critical ethnographic approaches in the past thirty or so years, these questions, newly formulated, now spur the emerging movement of post-critical ethnography.<sup>5</sup> At the same time and in parallel to these developments within ethnography, other education scholars have looked to participatory action research (PAR) as a way to enhance the dialogical, ethical and transformational challenges intrinsic to learning.<sup>6</sup> Thus, at the emerging nexus of post-critical ethnography and PAR, new insights that challenge the presuppositions and the capacity of an ethnographic approach alone continue to press the envelope of this method for teaching and promoting an ethics of liberation and justice. Moreover, the current developments within these two branches of education have yet to be brought to bear on theological education and ethics, a vacuum felt most significantly in the arena of practical ministry. Thus, despite the efforts of theologians and Christian ethicists to glean from the field of qualitative research, the practice of theological ethnography has not succeeded in producing the kind of moral and social transformation called for by Christian faith and discipleship. As post-critical ethnography and PAR propose, something more is needed to complete the circle of practical, formative learning.

In this paper, I argue for an alternative pedagogical method capable of surmounting the problems associated with both formal theologies and theological ethnographies on their own: that of Theological Action Research (TAR). Theological action research draws from models of action research developed most prominently in the field of educational studies to provide an alternative way of engaging in the learning and teaching of theology, theological ethics and practical ministry. TAR begins with the premise that theological knowledge must be pursued within a cooperative mode of inquiry capable of generating new insights into humanity's relation to God, while also engendering the ethical-political powers that give shape to collective life. Relational at its core, TAR promotes moral intertwining among its participants with the aim of generating transformed and transformative collective action. Christian formation is inherent in this kind of social, ecclesial activity because it is born of receptive, co-creative and participatory communities of practice engaged in the faithful pursuit of peace, justice and liberation.

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<sup>5</sup>There is a groundswell of new literature emerging in the intersecting and overlapping fields of critical ethnography, post-critical ethnography and public or engaged anthropology. For an introduction to this scholarship, see Peter R. Freebody, *Qualitative Research in Education: Interaction and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003); D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2012); and George W. Noblit, Susana Y. Flores and Enrique G. Murillo, Jr. (eds), *Postcritical Ethnography: Reinscribing Critique* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2004). For a discussion of some of these trends in cultural anthropology, see Stuart Kirsch, *Engaged Anthropology: Politics Beyond the Text* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018) and Louise Lamphere, 'The Convergence of Applied, Practicing, and Public Anthropology in the 21st Century', *Human Organization* 63/4 (2004), pp. 431–43. Any interdisciplinary essay such as this runs the risk of being clumsy in its terms. Admittedly, to the outsider, it is nearly impossible to delineate the fine distinctions between the emerging micro- and subfields in ethnography, education and cultural anthropology. For the purposes of this paper, I draw from post-critical ethnography, engaged anthropology and, most centrally, action research, simply because those have shaped my own learning. I invite other scholars to investigate more how novel fusions between these disciplines might produce even more dynamic pedagogical possibilities.

<sup>6</sup>On the compatibility of critical ethnography and PAR, see Julie Hemment, 'Public Anthropology and the Paradoxes of Participation: Participatory Action Research and Critical Ethnography in Provincial Russia', *Human Organization* 66/3 (2007), pp. 301–14.

Beginning with a recap of the turn to ethnography in theology and ethics, I then offer what I take to be three enduring limitations of this approach, prompted by current discussions in the field of critical and post-critical ethnography. I propose action research as a methodology uniquely compatible with the ethical and political aims of post-critical qualitative research and for meeting the challenges identified therein. I then proceed to argue for TAR as a pedagogy for the study and teaching of Christian ethics, outlining how I have built such a programme at my institution. I conclude by describing how TAR is beginning to reshape our degree curricula and how it also is driving us to locate the practical component of theological education more at the heart of our programmes because of the promise we see for how this pedagogical process can train and form students.

### The ethics of theological ethnography

Theological ethnographers do not necessarily reject Milbank's argument that theology should not surrender itself to the presuppositions of social science if it is to remain true to its proper subject and to provide an ontological basis for the social reality of the church. However, theologians appealing to the use of ethnographic study do challenge the extent to which Milbank's Christian ontology tends to swallow his ecclesiology and ethics. Nicholas Healy, for instance, contests that such a stance tends to discard the usefulness of various forms of social science in its view of the church, rendering its ecclesiology too pure, abstract and theoretical.<sup>7</sup> More a 'practical-prophetic' discipline for a church *in medias res* rather than a systematic or solely theoretical one, ecclesiology should focus on real practices and on the practical reason related to those activities. Based on such empirical study, moreover, ecclesiologists can then reflect critically on the concrete identity manifest in these practices in order to provide correction, proposing changes where the church's identity and actions belie its Christian witness.<sup>8</sup> Such a view contends that it is too simplistic (and possibly even deceptive) to presume an idealised view of the church and its social reality while neglecting to attend to concrete communities in their complexity, failures and innovations. The import of this difference is profound for training of church leaders.

Real churches are not simple or uniform. Rather, they are dynamic, messy and complicated organisms, incorporating multiple functions. As Healy observes, churches pursue multiple objectives, operating on many levels in their attempt to socialise their members into a distinctive way of life. Among other things, he states, churches serve as 'a moral guide and teacher' as well as 'a forum for moral inquiry', though some do so with greater success than others. But more like Tolstoy's unhappy families than their happy counterparts, no two churches are exactly the same. Each is different in its own way. Thus, Healy concludes,

The church's identity is constituted by a wide range of elements, all of which are on the move: by actions of the Holy Spirit; by beliefs, valuations, feeling and experiences of its members; by the relations between its members and both the church collective and the non- or anti-Christian societies around them; by social practices, rituals and institutions the church has developed in the course of its

<sup>7</sup>Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, p. 155.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 21, 46.

history; by the power structures, the financial considerations, the external constraints and opportunities that the church faces in diverse times and places; and so on.<sup>9</sup>

If ecclesiology is to be more than ideal, then to get at this dynamic identity and the complexity of the functions of actual churches, ecclesiology needs some kind of empirical method to help describe and assess them. A theological ideal itself will not provide this because it cannot attend to the concrete life of the church; such idealistic blueprints are, correspondingly, of little help to those attempting to lead these institutions and organizations.

To be sure, Milbank himself acknowledges the idealistic character of his ecclesiology and has subsequently called for ‘supplementation by judicious narratives’ in response to this charge.<sup>10</sup> Christian Scharen, among others, has picked up this suggestion, arguing that ethnography provides the ‘right-sized tool’ for writing such real ecclesiologies.<sup>11</sup> The disciplined, close attention to a particular community involved in writing an ethnography not only allows theological claims about the church to be tested against empirical data, but also provides a way of understanding how congregations and communities actually negotiate the complexity, pluralism and interfusion of current cultural and societal arrangements. It is a form of training. Hence, theological ethnography Scharen argues, following Nicholas Adams and Charles Elliot, engages in a deconstruction of ‘the disciplinary divide, calling for theologians to be better students of the real exactly as they see it: both now and not yet’.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, in Scharen’s view this practice can serve to correct the ‘crude cultural lens’ of a church–world divide by deploying a more sensitive instrument capable of a closer reading of the actual experience of churchgoers and congregations that can better help the church be the church. Not only does this allow for a more diverse view of faithfulness, but it also can provide vital guidance for how these churches might pursue more faithful practice in the world by helping them see where they have acquiesced to wider culture and how they might embody a more distinctively Christian ethic.<sup>13</sup>

I need not recount here the well-rehearsed history of how theological ethicists and ecclesialogists found their way to ethnography in order to point to some of the virtues of this turn for the practical training of ministers.<sup>14</sup> First, thick descriptions of real congregations and communities, written from ethnographic studies, have expanded and refined our theoretical conceptions by challenging them with local knowledge on the ground. This process has, in turn, precipitated growth in the wisdom and prudence inherent to the Christian way of life. Additionally, ethnography has stressed the process of continued learning as essential to growth in the Christian faith and church

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 167–8.

<sup>10</sup>John Milbank, ‘Enclaves, or Where is the Church?’, *New Blackfriars* 73/861 (June 1992), p. 344.

<sup>11</sup>Scharen, ‘Judicious Narratives’, pp. 142, 125.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>14</sup>An account of this turn is offered in Christian Scharen and Anna Marie Vigen (eds), *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011). See also Elizabeth Phillips, ‘Charting the “Ethnographic Turn”: Theologians and the Study of Christian Congregations’, in Peter Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 95–106.

leadership. An example of this can be seen in the ‘creative reflection generated by a wound’ recounted in Mary McClintock-Fulkerson’s *Places of Redemption*.<sup>15</sup>

Second, ethnographic study’s sensitivity to power and the careful consideration of how power flows in the constitution of theology, ecclesiology and ethics has served to enhance the practice of justice so as to inform it more deeply with charity. Too often reliance on theoretical descriptions of the church and its practices for the training of ministers leaves out the role of power dynamics due to a naïve presumption that reason is objective, impersonal and unbiased. Ethnography resists any attempt to elide power in ethical considerations and organisational structures. Instead, it seeks to make power’s operations and currents more evident. For instance, the stress on reflexivity and positionality associated with ethnographic writing has facilitated the kind of humility that deepens justice and charity with its attention to the roles played by various persons in the creation of meaning, especially as this opens up more space for those on the margins to speak and offer their theological meaning for themselves. The Italian Jesuit priest and pediatrician, Andrea Vicini, offers such a contribution in his ethnography of indigenous communities in Chiapas, Mexico, articulating his own subjectivity while also detailing how the people offer new insights on hospitality, memory and celebration that challenge and enrich conventional notions.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, ethnographic practice has contributed to instilling the kind of courage and audacity, born of an emboldened hope that is critical for engaging with real communities and the messiness of ecclesial Christian life. In doing so, it has fostered solidarity by lifting up the way communities act and make meaning together in the face of imposing obstacles. Luke Bretherton proffers an instance of this in his account of London citizens and the role of Christian faith and the church in the quest to recover democratic citizenship for the common good through grassroots organising in an environment of religious pluralism, economic disparity and centralised political power.<sup>17</sup> Such research and writing continues to shape theology and ethics (as well as how students are educated in these) in a way that dispels a crude approach that too simplistically subjects practical reason to theory, aligning it more with the dynamic and dialectic activity of moral judgement as it seeks faithfully to understand what it means to be God’s people in a particular place and time.<sup>18</sup>

### The limits of ethnography for learning theological ethics

Yet for all of its contributions to theology and ethics, the tool of theological ethnography has some genuine limits. Particularly with regard to the formation of students for practical ministry, some critiques raised by the emerging discipline of post-critical ethnography are pertinent. Post-critical ethnography is by no means a clear and defined approach. Instead, it is more of an ongoing, lively discussion among education scholars informed by critical theory and who make use of qualitative research as an approach to

<sup>15</sup>The quoted phrase is taken from Fulkerson’s essay ‘Interpreting a Situation: When is “Empirical” Also “Theological”?’ in Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, p. 136. But I think this encapsulates well the entirety of her ethnography of Good Samaritan United Methodist Church in *Places of Redemption: A Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: OUP, 2007).

<sup>16</sup>Andrea Vicini, ‘Living with Indigenous Communities in Chiapas, Mexico: The Transformative Power of Poverty and Suffering’, in Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology*, pp. 161–83.

<sup>17</sup>Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (Cambridge: CUP, 2015).

<sup>18</sup>Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology*, p. 74.

pursue social justice. A 'craggy terrain' of dialectic tensions between structures and flows of power, the communities and persons being studied, and the positionality of the researcher, post-critical ethnography is still being defined.<sup>19</sup> However, a unifying characteristic of post-critical ethnographers is the acknowledgement that 'methodological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions are intertwined', even as they realise there is no easy way of navigating this complex social landscape.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, as proponents of this approach increasingly emphasise, something more than observation, interpretation and publication needs to be done. I want to point to two critiques of the practice of theological ethnography identified by this post-critical perspective, because, as I will show, I think theological action research presents a way of addressing them. But before I do, I also want to note an additional issue intrinsic to current theological ethnography when viewed from the perspective of critical theory.

The first of the shortcomings concerns the degree to which the field of theological ethnography fails to grapple with the macro-level social and political conditions that have been unveiled by critical theory, and which shape so much of human life on the ground. This sort of analysis need not fall prey to sociological reductions or predetermined findings based on dominant conceptual categories (class warfare, for instance), and it can help us recognise the role broader frameworks and larger forces play in structuring of human actions, desires and relations. Thus, articulating one's own social position is only partially helpful if one does not also connect this articulation to the broader, more insidious register of what Fredric Jameson has called the 'political unconscious'.<sup>21</sup> At a time when the workings of the global market play such an evident role in directing and configuring society and individual action, a larger vision of the whole via theory remains essential if we are to avoid simply reiterating the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' by performing a fragmentary postmodern practice of what one ethnographer, following C. Wright Mills, has called 'isolated interpretivism'.<sup>22</sup>

Theological ethics and ethnography, therefore, must incorporate a discussion of the framing effects of these larger and higher level forces, because a vision of liberation that is not so informed remains too vague and too open to distortion. For not only do modern forms of captivity and oppression legitimate themselves by offering their own promises of liberation (a point of agreement between theologians and genealogists like Foucault), but also (and from a specifically theological perspective) a wider view of the prevailing disfigurements that plague society are essential for delimiting a Christian alternative to the idolatry of the market.<sup>23</sup> Hence, a theological vision oriented by unity and peace is even more important for Christian ethics in a context where the

<sup>19</sup>Jessica Nina Lester and Allison Daniel Anders, 'Engaging Ethics in Postcritical Ethnography: Troubling Transparency, Trustworthiness, and Advocacy', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 19/3 (Sept. 2018), p. 24 and Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 6.

<sup>20</sup>Lourdes Ortega, 'Methodology, Epistemology, and Ethics in Instructed SLA Research: An Introduction', *Modern Language Journal* 89/3 (2005), p. 317.

<sup>21</sup>Fredric Jameson, *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

<sup>22</sup>On the cultural logic of late capitalism, see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991). On isolated interpretivism see Bill J. Johnston, 'Critical Theory, Critical Ethnography, Critical Conditions: Considerations of Postcritical Ethnography', in Noblit et al., *Postcritical Ethnography*, p. 70.

<sup>23</sup>I see a strong overlap between thinkers as divergent as Milbank and Foucault here. Indeed, one could nearly describe the unifying thread of Foucault's work as an investigation of the new technologies of capture and oppression engendered by modernity.

promise of liberation offered by the secular order moves toward fragmentation and individualisation, thereby distorting notions of justice. To the extent that ethnography does not incorporate this level of analysis, it leaves itself open to dissolution in endless subjectivism and atomization, and students trained in this discipline will remain unaware of how they are being formed by such structures.

Of course, there are problems of being too theoretically dependent, and much of post-critical ethnography has attempted to try to respond to this risk. For instance, Kathy Hytten, a scholar in educational studies, argues that all too often ‘critical researchers substitute one form of hegemony for another’.<sup>24</sup> Thus, while gleaning from the insights of critical theory, post-critical ethnographers recognise that the primary responsibility of researchers is to the people studied, such that their research should be accessible to participants, and participants should be meaningfully involved in the research process.<sup>25</sup>

A second limitation of ethnographic practice, thus, is a tendency toward a monological mode of representation, interpretation, and discernment where scholars and their scholarship drive the account. Too often ethnography has itself engaged in ‘evasions of dialogue’ that exclude the community – even when it portrays itself as not doing so.<sup>26</sup> Such a move may even at times involve certain reflexive scripts that perform humility, but do so in service to an external publishing agenda or for presentation to colleagues and without acknowledging the extent to which ‘methods are ideas and theories in themselves’.<sup>27</sup> Thus, within the field of post-critical ethnography, questions about the relationship between the researcher and the researched continue to press on ethnographic practice and the vestiges of its colonial origins.<sup>28</sup>

Not only does this line of critique highlight the possible ways ethnography might become merely a new expertise through which insecure theologians and ethicists seek to legitimate themselves to the wider academy, but it also gives rise to a question about who has access to this research, and who engages in it. ‘Without a more developed sense of what a materially and theoretically efficacious relationship between researchers and the researched would look like’, Hytten therefore contends, ‘the ability for there to exist a true dialectic between the macro and micro worlds is compromised’.<sup>29</sup> In other words, the empirical data subserve a scholarly, theoretical purpose

<sup>24</sup>Kathy Hytten, ‘Postcritical Ethnography: Research as a Pedagogical Encounter’, in Noblit et al., *Postcritical Ethnography*, p. 96.

<sup>25</sup>Lester and Anders, ‘Engaging Ethics in Postcritical Ethnography’, pp. 18–20.

<sup>26</sup>I am deeply indebted to Lia Haro for these notions of monologue and evasions of dialogue. For more on the place of these distorting practices in anthropology and ethnography, see Lia Haro, ‘The End(s) of the End of Poverty’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 2014), p. 357.

<sup>27</sup>Noblit et al., ‘Postcritical Ethnography: An Introduction’, in *Postcritical Ethnography*, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup>Some researchers are turning to intersubjective encounter and narrative research as a way of engaging that disrupts the hegemonic knowledge-power structures that have long plagued anthropology. See Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce and Barbara Laslett, *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), particularly ch. 4. One narrative discipline that seeks to promote more dialogical encounter is testimonio. See John Beverley, ‘Testimonio, Subalternity and Narrative Authority’, in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds), *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), pp. 547–58.

<sup>29</sup>Hytten, ‘Postcritical Ethnography’, p. 100. One example of a view of theological ethnography that repeats this problem is Luke Bretherton’s appeal to Michael Burawoy’s ‘extended case method’ in his attempt to interrelate the micro and macro levels in interpretation. While such an approach may provide a way to reassess theory, it seems to fail to locate a place for formation or the involvement of the community in its process of coming to judgement. See Luke Bretherton, ‘Coming to Judgment: Methodological



divorced from the interests of those who are the objects of research. While attempts in post-critical ethnography to resolve this persistent issue intensify reflexivity, for theological ethicists this realisation prompts a more comprehensive question about the role of the community in coming to self-awareness, as well as the place of ethical formation and pedagogy in the doing of research itself.

Finally, for post-critical ethnographers as well as for scholars working in the sister field of engaged anthropology, despite the idea that critical ethnographic research aims at social transformation, the most prominent weakness associated with the practice is that it has mostly failed to actually transform the lives of the oppressed.<sup>30</sup> That is, it has not succeeded in instilling or cultivating the ethical-political powers within subject communities essential to transforming their state. As a result, new calls have emerged within the field for 'a willingness to get ones hands dirty' through a more direct and intentional commitment to the enactment and production of 'moral activity' that 'makes [ethnographers] responsible for the world they are producing when they interpret and critique'.<sup>31</sup> At the heart of this last endemic limitation is the need to enfold ethnographic activity within a social process of collective discernment that is active, collaborative, dialogical and formative.

### Action research as co-creative, dialogical, and formative

Participatory action research (PAR) is uniquely compatible with the aims of post-critical ethnography and may provide just such a remedy to the limitations outlined above. As a mode of collaborative research and mutual discernment aimed at resolving issues of pressing concern and co-creating the good of human flourishing, it also presents a way of drawing scholars into deep dialogue with local communities for the purpose of generating new knowledge and engaging in shared action. In addition, given the ongoing challenges of ethnography for ethical and political transformation, PAR offers a model of pedagogical, social activity capable of generating the kinds of ethical-political powers necessary for moral development. In this section, I define action research and describe how, as a pedagogical method, it meets the challenges listed above.

To begin, action research is a term coined by the mid-twentieth-century psychologist Kurt Lewin to describe a rather common form of human endeavour, 'namely, a repeated cycle of four basic moments: planning, acting, fact-finding, analysis' that builds on itself in compounding, spiralling fashion. Since its origin, it has been oriented toward making transformational change, even as the process has expanded and matured over time.<sup>32</sup> Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury define action research as

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Reflections on the Relationship Between Ecclesiology, Ethnography and Political Theory', *Modern Theology* 28/2 (Apr. 2012), pp. 167–96; and his 'Generating Christian Political Theory and the Uses of Ethnography', in Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, pp. 145–66.

<sup>30</sup>Hyttén, 'Postcritical Ethnography', p. 99. Similarly, scholars in the nascent field of 'engaged anthropology' share the objective of making 'constructive interventions into politics'; see Kirsch, *Engaged Anthropology*, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup>Johnston, 'Critical Theory and Critical Ethnography', p. 63; and Noblit et al., 'Postcritical Ethnography: An Introduction', p. 24.

<sup>32</sup>David H. Tripp, 'Socially Critical Action Research', *Theory into Practice* 29/3 (Summer 1990), p. 159. Schein attests to the transformational, collaborative nature of action research already announced in 'Lewin's dictum that you cannot understand an organization until you try to change it through a process of high researcher and high subject involvement'. Edgar H. Schein, 'Clinical Inquiry/Research', in Peter Reason

a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.<sup>33</sup>

PAR, though broad and diverse in its origins, more recently has become a way of naming more overtly the stress on the collaborative and collective dimension of this process over and against more individual or scholar-driven projects.<sup>34</sup> Although inclusive of traditional ethnographic practices, PAR is a self-reflective mode of inquiry and practical judgement developed *with* communities, and it seeks to bring academic knowledge into dialogue with local knowledge through intensive and careful listening in a powerfully cooperative mode of learning. As Romand Coles contends, ‘action research is a relational approach to generating knowledge, practices, communications, and powers’ in a process of ‘deep democratic engagement’ aimed at co-creative solutions born of new knowledge and action generated within these communities of practice.<sup>35</sup>

Action research, as a result, proceeds from intentional relationship building. To do so, it involves scholars and students first in the kind of relational meetings often associated with community organising, in which people’s stories, aspirations and frustrations are engaged by listening to their experiences and involvements.<sup>36</sup> A listening campaign will include many of these meetings with the hope of creating a platform for collaboration in an intentional community of practice. This activity inherently cultivates a profound receptivity among participants, a capacity that tends to build on itself in positive-relational feedback loops as relationships are deepened and solidified.<sup>37</sup> Thus, as part of PAR, people are brought together in new kinds of ‘academy-community assemblages’ for the purpose of shared action and learning. Additionally, the process of listening evinces issues and concerns (or wounds), as well as shared aspirations, passions and desires that become the focal point for the joint scholarship and community engagement intrinsic to action research.<sup>38</sup> This relational origin gives them durability and potency while keeping them flexible, so that they do not become rigidly fixated or externally coopted.

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and Hilary Bradbury (eds), *Handbook of Action Research: The Concise Paperback Edition* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2006), p. 187.

<sup>33</sup>Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, 2nd edn (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), p. 4.

<sup>34</sup>Orlando Fals Borda, ‘Participatory (Action) Research in Social Theory: Origins and Challenges’, *Handbook of Action Research*, pp. 27–37.

<sup>35</sup>Romand Coles, ‘Transforming the Game: Democratizing the Publicness of Higher Education and Commonwealth in Neoliberal Times’, *New Political Science* 36/4 (2014), pp. 629–30. A similar articulation is offered by John Heron and Peter Reason in ‘The Practice of Co-operative Inquiry: Research “with” rather than “on” People’, in *Handbook of Action Research*, pp. 144–5. According to Coles, action research goes beyond praxis in that it is reducible neither to application of theoretical concepts nor understanding derived from practice alone. It is instead engaged collaborative research in practice and action.

<sup>36</sup>Romand Coles and Blasé Scarnati, ‘“Sing us a New Song” – Listening to the Heartbeat of Democratic Transformation at Northern Arizona University’, a white paper (unpublished), p. 5.

<sup>37</sup>Coles discusses this dynamic at length, emerging from his own work at Northern Arizona University, in Romand Coles, *Visionary Pragmatism: Radical and Ecological Democracy in Neoliberal Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 49–58.

<sup>38</sup>Coles, ‘Transforming the Game’, pp. 623–4.

A central tenet of PAR is, therefore, its ‘participatory’ nature. In this way it stretches the boundaries of ethnographic research and writing to include more community members and input, counteracting the monological tendency of scholar-centred ethnographic studies with a dialogical and collaborative approach. In this sense, it moves more in line with Arjun Appadurai’s call for the ‘right to research’, wherein the very activity of research itself (as a ‘generalized capacity to make disciplined inquiries into those things we need to know but do not know yet’) is expanded to include all those persons who have a stake in the judgements this research produces.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, because PAR involves an intentional consideration of power dynamics in the collective generation of research, it incorporates modes of collaborative decision-making and discernment that encourage mutual commitment and expand capability through a shared pursuit of knowledge and social change.

The scaffolding for PAR thus consists of a Freirean form of ‘problem-posing education’ that privileges a pedagogy ‘forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed’, where research is interwoven with teaching and learning. Designed to cultivate a critical consciousness born of dialogue and oriented to intervention and transformation, this approach to learning incites active engagement on the part of all participants, not passive reception or professional ownership.<sup>40</sup> According to PAR, learning that neglects collaborative relationship is incomplete and incompetent. Moreover, it affirms that at the heart of education itself is a process of deep formation. Recognising with ethnography that knowledge itself is deeply intertwined with social relations, PAR nevertheless goes further to engage values and commitments, incorporating them into and letting them guide the process of learning and scholarship.<sup>41</sup> When done well, the result is a thick kind of social activity that both involves those who had previously been the subjects of study into the process of knowledge acquisition and production and integrates community building and moral and ethical formation into that very process of inquiry. Intrinsic to PAR, then, is a ‘moral intertwining’ of all participants in an intentional and strategic process.<sup>42</sup> By nature a polyvocal, democratic, layered and co-creative pursuit that focuses as much on the habits, dispositions and shared practices of the community as integral to generating a platform for action, PAR can be described as what anthropologist Lia Haro calls an *eth-o-graphy*.<sup>43</sup> Not meant to be merely a clever

<sup>39</sup>Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (New York: Verso, 2013), pp. 269–70.

<sup>40</sup>Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, 30th anniversary edn (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014 [1984]), pp. 48, 73, 80.

<sup>41</sup>Mary Brydon-Miller, Davydd Greenwood and Patricia Maguire, ‘Why Action Research?’, *Action Research* 1/1 (2003), pp. 11, 20.

<sup>42</sup>Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research*, 4th edn (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2014), p. 15; see also Egon G. Guba’s ‘Foreword’ in this same volume.

<sup>43</sup>I am deeply indebted to Lia Haro and Romand Coles for teaching me to understand action research this way. Lia has developed this term based on her own ethnographic research and critical anthropological study. Additionally, I suggest that viewing PAR this way allows for including the real concerns of the ‘turn to affect’ as part of a broader recognition that ‘there is a need not just for different kinds of thinking but for an alternative ethos, mood, or disposition’ within the academy and scholarship itself. See Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, ‘Introduction’, in Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, (eds), *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 10. This is not to dismiss critical inquiry, but to realise that such critical inquiry has failed to generate the kinds of formative communities capable of purposeful response to the larger forces at play because it has failed to make any real contact with a public its proponents tend to view as deluded and inept at grasping the realities of their situation (see p. 19). Eth-o-graphy intentionally stresses the process of community-building for transformative practice.

neologism, eth-o-graphy highlights the dynamic, radically democratic and dialogical, and co-creative nature of moral production inherent to the social activity of cooperative inquiry.

### Theological action research as ethical formation

One may already see the possibilities for using the social activity of PAR for reframing how we approach theological education, ethics and training for practical ministry. But let me more explicitly describe how *theological* action research (TAR) as a method of practical education incorporates formation in Christian ethics while cultivating the collective discernment necessary to make judgements about what it means to be faithful in a specific context and situation. Along the way, I will recount how I have begun to develop such a pedagogical approach with my own graduate ministry students at a Catholic, Jesuit institution. In conclusion, I will point to what this pedagogical approach has meant for the practical ministry component of our programmes and how it has begun to impact the whole of our degree curricula.

Six years ago, I came to Loyola University Chicago's Institute of Pastoral Studies to direct the Contextual Education programme. Contextual education was the place in the curriculum where our students were required to engage in practical experience and to begin to gain fluency in some of the specific skills and roles of their intended profession. A one-semester, fifteen-week course, it was generally taken at the end of a student's programme. Students chose sites based on their own interests and the course was structured around their presentations of brief case studies for small group conversation. While I do not deny the importance of this aspect of practical theological education, I was dissatisfied with the limited and individual-focused structure of the experience and curriculum. Having observed the power of PAR in other arenas, I was convinced that redesigning contextual education in a mode of TAR and its relational approach to the generation of knowledge would prove uniquely potent for the formation and training of ministry students in the pursuit of solidarity, justice and kingdom praxis essential to ecclesial faithfulness.<sup>44</sup> Bringing formal theological education into conversation with local knowledge and experiences, students are instructed in how to build 'communities of practice' for textured, collaborative inquiry.<sup>45</sup> The aim is for students to embark with the community in a shared pursuit of knowing God and in discerning what it means to take faithful action in their locations given the issues they face. Relational, participatory, dialogical and initially problem-driven, the dynamic co-learning systems these students develop shape them through a social activity of theological discernment that seeks a deeper understanding of who God is, and thus of who we are to be as God's creatures.

<sup>44</sup>The work of Romand Coles at Northern Arizona University and their Action Research Teams (ARTs) programme was the model I took for my own design. See Coles, 'Transforming the Game'. For theological educators, particularly within Catholic schools, one can see the very strong links already to liberation theology inherent to this pedagogical approach. See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, 15th anniversary edn (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988 [1974]), particularly part 4, section 2.

<sup>45</sup>On the role of communities of practice in new learning, see Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998); and Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott and William M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

Moving to a TAR model required a number of course modifications. First, it required extending the requirement from one semester to two. This was important for building in the time necessary to form relationships, listen intently and to begin to gather a community of practice. It also meant adding an additional semester of preparation on the front end of the course, during which students learn about TAR, connect to community partners or ministry sites, reflect on their own vocation, social location and identity, and begin to articulate what a TAR project could look like. Thus, the entire process now encompasses three semesters. While working at their site, the students also take a multi-dimensional anchor course spanning both semesters that includes instructional presentations, skill-based workshops and small, reflection group coaching. The course moves in the rhythm of Ignatian spirituality, organised as a cycle of ‘contemplation in action’ through four steps (or subunits): (1) prayer (*oratio*), (2) reading (*lectio*), (3) discernment (*iudicare*) and (4) work (*opus*). The aim is to involve students in a social activity of learning that at the same time shapes them in a dynamic practice of eth-o-graphy, bringing method and content closer together.

At their sites, students begin with relationship building and learning the practice of attentive listening, generating trust and accountability. To this end, course workshops provide them some basic ethnographic skills on observation and interviewing, along with training in relational meetings as well as organisational timelining. At the same time, they maintain journals recording what they are learning and tracking their own vocational development. The idea is that, by the end of the first semester, the students will have begun to identify with their site communities a key issue that they plan to investigate, and which emerges from the pressing theological and social questions they are asking. The second semester then picks up on this work of listening and reading in order to begin more research-infused discernment, wherein students construct communities of practice (or action teams) to take up this work. Along the way, they continue to learn to read power dynamics, recruit leaders, address conflict, access relevant research and embark upon an iterative process of co-creating new solutions. At a year-end TAR symposium, students gather to celebrate their work and share their projects with one another, establishing a culture of TAR and generating energy for this activity across the student body.

A central challenge of this process, not unlike the challenge of integrating ethnography with theology, is how to bring formal theological knowledge with its dependence on revelation together with the localised understanding of knowledge intrinsic to action research. As a promising mode of bridging this gap, TAR has found traction in other places, most notably in the Action Research: Community Society (ARCS) group associated with Heythrop College at the University of London. Engaging in collaborative action research projects that bring together local congregations and scholars, ARCS takes a process-oriented view of learning, one based in practice that involves a multi-layered theological conversation that is open to “‘interruptions”, or “epiphanies””.<sup>46</sup> But what makes my approach distinct from that of the Heythrop programme’ is that, while both focus on dialogue and collaboration, the TAR curriculum that I have

<sup>46</sup>Clare Watkins, ‘Practising Ecclesiology: From Product to Process: Developing Ecclesiology as a Non-Correlative Process and Practice through the Theological Action Research Framework of Theology in Four Voices’, *Ecclesial Practices* 2 (2015), p. 38. Watkins is part of the ARCS team at Heythrop College and is co-author of the first book-length engagement with TAR. See Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney and Clare Watkins, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

developed is infused with community organising practices that place a greater stress on the need to build ethico-political powers and participatory agency. Convinced that the future of ministry, particularly in our current context, will require the (re)generation of the ministries within which students will serve as much as learning to serve in new ways, I involve them in community-building practices aimed to create a radically democratic social fabric for collective discernment and agency. Thus, in tandem with prayer, ethnographic listening and journaling, my students engage community organising tactics to identify shared interests and issues, build trust and locate the leaders needed to conduct an action research campaign. The effect is to give a more overt ethico-political dimension to TAR.

At the same time, I spur students to practise with their communities the reading of scripture and the investigation of their traditions with the aim of shedding light on the disjunction between the world as it is and as it should be. For us, this includes ongoing exploration of the social teaching of the Catholic tradition and its emphasis on social analysis, but actively connects this examination with justice, peacemaking and liberative practices that allow students to translate the often abstract principles of human dignity, solidarity, common good and equality into the kinds of real collective engagements aimed at transformation called for by liberation theologies. A process that attempts to bridge the distance that too often lingers between the church's social teachings and liberation theologies, the cooperative inquiry at the heart of TAR begins to train students in a methodology of collective critical abduction or theo-political pragmatism essential to negotiating the contours of faithfulness in their communities on the ground.<sup>47</sup> Intrinsically, this ongoing conversation provides a practice of 'generative theming', inviting the community to begin to identify the immanent sway of the powers and principalities that shape their reality while also providing a counter-vision that opens the realm of the possible.<sup>48</sup> The resulting collaborative practice of theological interpretation that expands the activity of ethnography interfuses the voices of tradition, scripture and even critical theory with the experience of the people as a way of building capacity for transformative activity, while holding all parties answerable to their shared experience of the issues and their joint endeavour to address them. Here a cooperative investigation involves both macro-level social and political conditions as well as theological vision in a dynamic and receptive process that incorporates and is shaped by the community *in situ*. This process cultivates a kind of formation that goes well beyond professional competencies and ministerial identity and into moral production and ethical development as well as political practice, while locating the student/scholar within a web of accountability to all the participants, conducting an eth-o-graphy.

Hence, I agree with Elaine Graham that action research focuses on the cultivation of praxis, and that TAR must function with an Aristotelian focus on the 'cultivation of character, of disposition' and the 'formation of virtue'.<sup>49</sup> However, I contend that it is

<sup>47</sup>As the philosopher C. S. Peirce recognised, people are engaged in abduction all the time, as it is a natural part of how humans negotiate their world. As expounded by Peirce, abduction, or the bringing together of inductive investigation and deductive theoretical speculation, is simply a way of naming this iterative process. See C. S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2, ed. Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 226–41. Similarly, Romand Coles dilates his own form of what he calls 'visionary pragmatism' in his book by that name (see n. 37 above)

<sup>48</sup>Freire, *Pedagogy*, pp. 97ff.

<sup>49</sup>Elaine Graham, 'Is Practical Theology a Form of "Action Research"?' *International Journal of Practical Theology* 17/1 (2013), pp. 150, 171. While greatly influenced by Graham's account of TAR and even, as will become evident below, her turn to Ignatian spirituality at the end of this essay (following David Coghlan), I

necessary to go further and locate this ethical formation within its necessary theo-political register so as to infuse it with a more transformational character. This is even more important given the extent to which neoliberal forces and rationality have infused themselves into every facet of society, including theological education.<sup>50</sup> Any possibility for ‘transforming the game’ in a context where capital markets dominate and dictate the shape of human life and action will need a kind of pedagogical political practice resonant with and animated by an alternative vision.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, Graham is exactly right when she states that ‘Theological action research is about growing in faith and discerning the presence of God in the midst of practical engagement’, while defining its objectives as (1) to understand a situation through careful attention, (2) ‘to praxis-driven change’ and (3) to ethical formation.<sup>52</sup> But I want to add to this a more political dimension, one in which the challenge of change does not merely derive from inner values, but, more radically, from the practice of the rule of Christ in an exercise of Spirit-led communal discernment. Here revealed truth and even its systematic, theoretical propositions come to meet human experience, with all of its complexities and power dynamics, and vice versa, allowing each to shape the other in a community of practical knowledge oriented to transformation. Contrary to some initial suspicions, TAR need not be anti-doxological. Quite the contrary, the church’s vision of God and God’s work can grow as its ethico-political faculties are enhanced through the action-research cycle.

Furthermore, taking up the insights of David Coghlan, I have situated the TAR programme within Ignatian spirituality, allowing us to develop a comprehensive vision for the programme based on the faith tradition of the institution.<sup>53</sup> As a cycle of ‘prayer and activity’, Ignatian spirituality as limned by Coghlan offers a framework for TAR that takes for granted God’s active and creative involvement with the world.<sup>54</sup> Seeking to be participants in this *missio Dei*, and thus ‘to act as God acts’, the TAR process maps on to an ongoing examen-style cycle of reflection, experience and action that roots it within spiritual life. Hence, as Coghlan states, ‘For Christians formed in the Ignatian tradition, the reflection in question here is an inquiry into how God is at work in their lives and in the world, and into how God might shape appropriate responses and reactions for here and now.’<sup>55</sup> Such commitment allows for a process of theological inquiry that involves all those involved in this research a process of shared inquiry. As Coghlan contends, Ignatian spirituality in this way ‘presents a contribution to action research that explicitly addresses the experiential knowing that comes from

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continue to find her presentation (and his) of TAR to be missing an overarching political (or theo-political) and christological frame sufficient to give substance to the ethical formation she so rightly outlines.

<sup>50</sup>On the ascendancy of neoliberal reason, see Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), pp. 17–45.

<sup>51</sup>Though he makes no appeal to theology, I take this notion of transforming the game from Romand Coles, ‘Transforming the Game’, pp. 622–39.

<sup>52</sup>Graham, ‘Practical Theology’, pp. 163, 177.

<sup>53</sup>Graham turns to Coghlan at the conclusion of her discussion of practical theology and action research, and I am deeply indebted to her for alerting me to Coghlan’s scholarship. For Graham, this allows her to suggest a way of viewing TAR that connects the methods and convictions of action research to ‘a systematic articulation of the values and world-view’ of Christian theism, not all that different from what I am suggesting. See Graham, ‘Practical Theology’, p. 174.

<sup>54</sup>David Coghlan, ‘Seeking God in All Things: Ignatian Spirituality as Action Research’, *The Way* 43/4 (Jan. 2004), p. 97.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 101.

religious faith and how that knowing leads to practical knowing that is in harmony with the presentational and propositional knowing of the Christian community'.<sup>56</sup>

My programme is still young, but the power of TAR for theological education and training in practical ministry is already making itself evident, even though my findings must be taken as preliminary at this point. I am very much still learning how to do TAR myself and learning to shepherd students through it. Not every student gets it and administrative challenges are legion. But already students are expressing the depth and multilayered nature of the integrated learning they are gaining. From learning the ethics of racial reconciliation to reconceiving eucharistic ministry and spiritual direction to participating in groups involved in community transformation, students are discovering the powerful learning that takes place in the process of eth-o-graphy. Admittedly, this is hard to do in the span of one academic year, so I am looking for ways to work with community partners in order for future students to build off of previous students' work, as well as how to expand TAR throughout the entirety of our school's curricula. An additional upshot of doing this is that it deepens our footprint in the wider community and thus raises the possibility of bringing my institution as a whole into richer exchanges of collaboration with actual ministries and organisations.

Moreover, the promise of TAR in our case extends even further, since, as a Catholic university, we must seek to take seriously Pope John Paul II's charge to Catholic universities to be instruments of progress. And as a Jesuit school, our specific tradition calls us to seek to become what the El Salvadorian Jesuit martyr and university rector Ignacio Ellacuría called a *proyecto social*, or social project.<sup>57</sup> A TAR model of theological education and training in practical ministry serves as a way to recover these mandates. Guiding our students through the process of forging TAR communities of practice, the programme thus provides a platform for pursuing moral and spiritual formation in the pursuit of justice that only becomes possible through such a place-based, participatory and relational, and attentive mode of inquiry.<sup>58</sup> In this way, the institution is beginning to regain a sense of itself as a 'social force' while teaching our students that the doing of effective ministry, especially in an age of suspicion toward the church, can take the form of creating these kinds of communities of practice for learning.<sup>59</sup> Such an endeavour is not easy. It requires community, faculty and administrative buy-in, which is not always easy to obtain given the competition, isolation and neoliberal policies so prevalent in both academy and congregations. But the potential it holds for helping theological institutions rediscover the good they are supposed to serve for the church, the public and the world is significant.

<sup>56</sup>David Coghlan, 'Ignatian Spirituality as Transformational Social Science', *Action Research* 3/1 (2005), p. 104.

<sup>57</sup>See Adolfo Nicolás, 'Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry: Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today', remarks for Networking Jesuit Higher Education: Shaping the Future for a Human, Just, and Sustainable Globe, Mexico City (23 Apr. 2010), p. 7: [http://www.sjweb.info/documents/ansj/100423\\_Mexico%20City\\_Higher%20Education%20Today\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.sjweb.info/documents/ansj/100423_Mexico%20City_Higher%20Education%20Today_ENG.pdf).

<sup>58</sup>See Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, 'The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education', address delivered at Santa Clara University, 6 Oct. 2000, in *Faith, Justice, and American Higher Education* 31/1 (Jan. 2001), pp. 13–29; reprinted in George W. Traub (ed.), *A Jesuit Education Reader* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), pp. 144–62.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 159.



## Conclusion

A peculiar kind of social activity, TAR provides a way together to generate the theological knowledge and ethics essential for the church's life. I teach students to do this in the hope that they will then work to make their ministries TAR-style dynamic learning systems going forward. Because it interfuses deductive theological knowledge with inductive, local ecclesial knowledge through an intentionally democratic process of collective discernment, TAR offers a uniquely formative way of understanding the disclosure of God in Christ for this time and place that is not stuck within rigid and static views of knowledge. An intentional kind of social activity, TAR facilitates the 'moral intertwining' of participants through a corporate pedagogy that allows for openness, improvisation and revision, while not allowing these to become shallow or fragmented into isolated, emotivist interpretations.<sup>60</sup> It is, thus, an eth-o-graphic process that, while originally problem-centred and issue-driven, incorporates the learning gained from attending to these concerns within a formative processes designed to shape and empower communities. Pedagogically, it offers a way of training students in the knowledge of theology and ethics that puts collaborative involvement in practical ministry and the community sites more at the heart of learning.

Several implications for our wider curriculum are already emerging from the development of this TAR programme, posing some new possibilities for retooling our school programmes. First, it is pushing us as an institution to buck the singular focus on 'student-centred' education by beckoning us to connect more intentionally and collaboratively with external organisations and institutions (including congregations and parishes) in ways that involve them within the educational and research activities of our school. To this extent, it bears the promise of breaking down divides between the academy and the public, as well as between theological schools and faith communities. As a result, I have begun to experiment with the possibility of public classrooms that join students and wider communities for shared learning. Second (and at the same time), these relationships are beginning to pull faculty members out of their disciplinary and departmental silos, allowing them to see how their own formation has been produced in moulds of competition, isolation and monological communication. Hence, our faculty are currently looking at ways we might work together to interweave TAR components throughout more of our course offerings, interfusing practical ministry with various theological subdisciplines. Third (and intimately connected with the two previous points), TAR is helping us to begin to find a way to engage students in a process of formation and learning that resists the separation of these practices. The result is an emerging theological curriculum that puts practical ministry at its heart. Learning is a social activity, and all social activities, intentionally or not, engage in moral production. Method and content cannot be separated, and my pilot work suggests that TAR can be a powerful way of conducting theological education just because it incorporates this basic principle. More research, experimentation and assessment are needed in order to fully verify this conclusion, but as I have tried to show, my initial findings indicate

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<sup>60</sup>Stringer, *Action Research*, p. xvi. The notion of corporate pedagogy has strong connections to the form of practical theology developed by Edward Farley; see his 'Interpreting Situations: An Inquiry into the Nature of Practical Theology', in Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling (eds), *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 17–18.

that it offers a potent way of fusing formation and learning for practical ministry. Writing eth-o-graphies through TAR learning can engage scholars, students and communities in a process of theology as a social activity, a practice capable of generating the kind of collective discernment essential to a faith that seeks both understanding and transformation.<sup>61</sup>

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