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On the Value of Action and Participatory Research for Intercultural Theology: Reflections in the Light of a Research Project on “Science and Religion in French-Speaking Africa”

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Abstract

This article explores the importance of “action research” and “participatory research” (AR and PR) for intercultural theology. After introducing these research strategies, it provides a theological rationale for their use in intercultural theology: (1) they move beyond false dichotomies between theoretical and practical theology; (2) they understand professional theologians as part of communities of believers; and (3) they allow for intercultural encounters which approach “the other” as partners in research rather than merely objects of research. Using the example of a research project which studies attitudes to the interface between science and Christian faith among African university students and academics, the article considers three crucial issues for the value and use of AR and PR in intercultural theology: (1) the intrinsic motivation of the partners

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for intercultural research projects, (2) the role of shared visions of change and (3) the question of truth implied in visions of human flourishing.¹

Keywords

intercultural theology – action research – participatory research – science and religion – Africa – catholicity – liberation – human flourishing

The emerging discipline of intercultural theology holds great promise, both for the worldwide church and for the renewal of other theological disciplines. It reflects the growing realization that different segments of the Christian community can only develop appropriate contextual theologies and can only grow in their understanding of the Scriptures and of the meaning of the gospel in their context if they engage in a critical and open dialogue with other parts of the worldwide Christian community. Yet, as an emerging field of studies, intercultural theology is in considerable flux with different perspectives and methodological approaches on offer. For the sake of this article, we propose to understand intercultural theology as the discipline which “orchestrates and studies [the theological] conversation between Christian communities from different cultural settings.” (van den Toren 2015:25) In this article, we intend to contribute to the wider discussion concerning the nature and appropriate methodologies of intercultural theology by exploring the value of “action research” (AR) and “participatory research” (PR) for intercultural theology. This cluster of methods, which also shows a family resemblance with the related method of “appreciative inquiry” (AI), is of particular value for intercultural theology, because it helps to address a number of issues that need attention if we want to engage in an intercultural conversation that is not dominated by academic voices trained in the West. It does so, in the first place, by making Christian communities in other parts of the world conversation partners, rather than objects of research. Closely related, it allows us to engage in a

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conversation between more academic theology and the espoused and lived theology of the people of God (cf. on these needs van den Toren 2015). Finally, it takes seriously the fact that many academic and educational institutions in the Global South have limited resources and interest to invest research in projects that have no direct practical relevance. The separation between theoretical and practical theological reflection may itself be a modern Western invention. Attention to AR and PR therefore reflects the theological conviction that “mission always aims at transformation” which motivated the choice of “conversion and transformation” as the theme for the 2016 conference of the International Association of Mission Studies.

This article explores the value of PR and AR for intercultural theology on the basis of our experiences with the project “Science and Religion in French-Speaking Africa,” a collaborative project between the Protestant Theological University (PThU, Groningen, the Netherlands) and the Groupes Bibliques Universitaires de l’Afrique Francophone (GBU-AF), which was funded by the Templeton World Charity Foundation (TWCF) running from 2014 to 2017. The project researches the understanding of the relationship between science and religion amongst Christian graduate students and academics in three major university cities in French-Speaking Africa: Abidjan (Ivory Coast), Yaoundé (Cameroon) and Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo). The project has both more theoretical and more practical goals: it intends to analyze African approaches to the relationship between science and religion asking whether these can feed in new insights to the global science and religion debate that in the last centuries has been overwhelmingly shaped by the Western Enlightenment context. If needed, it also hopes to come up with alternative ways of understanding this relationship that might help these Christian students and academics in their discipleship in their university context. This combination of more theoretical and more practical interests is also reflected in the intended outputs: apart from academic publications, it also envisages the development of course material and a website aimed at students and academics in French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa.

In this article, we will first introduce AR and PR methods and their relationship to intercultural theology. We will then give a broader theological rationale for AR and PR strategies in intercultural theology. We will finish with some evaluative comments both concerning the use of these research strategies in this specific project and for their value in the wider enterprise of intercultural theological dialogue and reflection. Both the theological rationale and the practical example point (1) to the importance of the intrinsic motivation of the different partners in intercultural projects; (2) to the role of an at least partially shared vision for change; and (3) to an intrinsic relationship

between questions of truth and visions of human flourishing implied in visions for change.

Introducing AR and PR

AR and PR are part of a wider cluster of new research methods in the social sciences that “combine inquiry with creating direct social change and is not limited to just explanation of information or data [and reflect] a different level of commitment and influence of those being studied on and in the research process.” (Bell et al. 2004, 2). As such these approaches are part of a “continuum of naturalistic, post-positivist, systemic research methodology” (Bell et al. 2004, 9). AR’s main focus is on change, it is “concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes.” (Reason and Bradbury 2006:1)

“Participatory research methods are geared towards planning and conducting the research.” (Bergold and Thomas 2012: para. 1). There is a close relationship between AR and PR: “The common aim of these approaches is to change social reality on the basis of insights into everyday practices that are obtained by means of participatory research – that is, collaborative research on the part of scientists, practitioners, service users, etc.” (Bergold and Thomas 2012: para. 6). This is particularly clear in methodological approaches that are described as “Participatory Action Research,” which intend to combine the strength of both methods (Bell et al. 2004:5–6; Willms, Arratia, and Makondesa 2004). The focus is, however, different: AR is focused on improving practice, not necessarily but often by using participatory methodology, and PR is focused on the inclusion of the participants and partners in the research process, also if the intended outcome would not primarily be action focused, but rather a growth in understanding. PR therefore resonates well with post-colonial interests that underline that colonized and missionized populations have too often, and too long, been the objects of others who defined their identity and needs, and that look for methods that allow for “subaltern” perspectives to be heard for themselves.

Both methods have an affinity with so-called “appreciative inquiry” (AI), an approach to organizational analysis and learning: “Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative co-evolutionary search for the best people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves the discovery of what gives ‘life’ to a living system when it is most effective, alive, and constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms.” (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2003:2) With AR, AI focuses on change; with PR, it values the tacit and explicit

knowledge and experience of the situation concerned by the community; but AI again slightly changes the focus, this time to the insights of the community concerned.

AR and PR should be considered “research styles” (Bergold and Thomas 2012: para. 3) or broader methodological strategies, rather than what we might call “research methods” (Denscombe 2010:3–10). Both research styles can be combined with multiple methods (Klein 2012:5). Some of these are standard qualitative research methods, such as semi-structured interviews. Some tools are particularly apt for AR and PR, such as “group model building” (GMB),² focus groups (cf. de Roest 2015), or “conceptual events.”³ The “Theological Action Research” (TAR) program developed by Helen Cameron, Clare Watkins and their team⁴ is a combination of a “research style” and a “research tool.” It combines a number of the broad sensitivities behind AR and PR and applies these to issues in practical theology, but it has developed this in an elaborated methodology that gives particular attention to what they call “theology in four voices” (normative theology, formal theology, espoused theology and operant theology) (Cameron et al. 2010:53–56) and to the specific role of insider and outsider groups (Cameron et al. 2010:73–74).

As with all research tools and even broader methodological approaches, the question is not which tool or method is universally better, but rather which approach and which collection of tools is best indicated for a specific research

2 “GMB involves a number of experts and other stakeholders in a series of face-to-face sessions. A facilitator and modeler help the participants to describe their situation in the form of a qualitative or quantitative system dynamics model. The process via which GMB brings about these outcomes boils down to the elicitation of stakeholder’s ideas and goals, confronting them with each other and with available data and combining them in an overall model.” (Rouwette, Bleijenbergh, and Vennix 2016:1).

3 “Conceptual events are trans-disciplinary, trans-contextual and trans-experiential fora that *intentionally* nudge persons with different truth perspectives (or paradigms) to construct a shared, ethically compelling framework for understanding the problem and the behavioural and social solution.” (Willms, Arratia, and Makondesa 2004:26).

4 “Theological Action Research is an approach to research that focuses on enabling practitioners to renew their practices or the meaning they attach to those practices. An outsider team with expertise in research and relevant academic disciplines (sociological and theological) works in partnership with an insider team, who are close to the practice studied. [...] Theological Action Research starts with a theological question for research and then uses theological methods to interpret the data; it is thus characterized by being theological ‘all the way through’ as well as by its being grounded in particular practices.” (Watkins et al. 2012:73).

problem and a particular context. In what follows we will therefore consider the value of AR and PR for intercultural theology.

In the Science and Religion in French-Speaking Africa project we have used “group model building” (Bom forthcoming) and focus groups as the main methods for data-gathering, and discourse analysis as one of the methods of data analysis. When looking at the relationship between AR and PR, the project has a stronger emphasis on the participatory character than on the action focus. GMB allowed for the local voice to be expressed with as little direction as possible through outside perspectives influencing the shaping of the questions. Focus groups allowed for the testing of the interpretation of the data in the local groups and further focus groups permitted the local groups to express their proper understanding of the best ways forward. The research remains, however, one step removed from action itself. In terms of the four voices of Cameron it focuses on the “espoused theology” of the local groups, but it does not analyze the “operant theology” implicit in practices. The resulting website and course material are also one step removed from the practical discipleship itself in the world of the university that the project envisages. This stronger focus on the participatory element above the action element is motivated by our interest in intercultural dialogue: the approaches to and understandings of the relationship between science and religion, which we discover through GMB and focus groups can more easily be brought in dialogue with Western perspectives, while proposals focused on action might be even more particular to the specific social context and therefore harder to relate to the Western context. With Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, and for profoundly theological reasons (van den Toren 2011:93–119), we believe that

Any account of the given cosmos in a spoken or written word is culturally framed, yet if we approach our inquiry with appropriate critical skills and discipline, our account may provide some perspective on what is universal, and on the knowledge-creating process which frames this account.

REASON AND BRADBURY 2006:7

This is precisely what allows the intercultural theological conversation not only concerning practices, but also concerning understandings of reality reflected in approaches to the relationship between science and religion. We will return to this below. Within the constraints of the project, we were not able to equally develop the participatory and action research elements of the project in equal depth in view of the intended intercultural dialogue; we therefore placed a stronger stress on the participatory element.

A Theological Rationale for Participatory and Action Research

Our interest in AR and PR did not grow out of an isolated attention to research methodology, which we subsequently tried to correlate with theological convictions. We rather started out with theological convictions that had grown out of our work in theological education in cross-cultural situations where we worked as guests from church communities from other parts of the world (in French-Speaking Africa and Latin America). These experiences of working in multicultural institutions on the one hand, and growing theological convictions concerning what it means to be part of a worldwide and multicultural Christian community on the other hand, made us look for methodological approaches that we might appropriate within this wider theological – and Christian – framework. Three convictions are fundamental.

In the first place, there is no dichotomy between knowing God and living with God, between practical theology and systematic theology (cf. Charry 1999; Farley 1983). This does not mean that one only engages in theological reflection for pragmatic reasons. The desire to know God for who God is, for no other reason than the desire to know, glorify and enjoy God, is a fundamental, and possibly the first, reason for doing theology (Berkhof 1985:13–14; Toren 2014:87–89). There is, however, no systematic theological reflection that does not at the same time have practical ramifications. There is, conversely, no practical theological reflection that does not lead us back to fundamental questions about the nature of God and God's relationship to the world. The separation between theological theory and practice is a consequence of the Enlightenment (Farley 1983:65) and does not do justice to traditional Christian understandings of the nature of theology. As Christians and theological educators, we engage in theological reflection because we desire to grow ourselves and help others grow in our knowledge of God and our life with God.

Secondly, the theologian is a member of a (local) community of believers and therefore also of the church universal before he or she is an academic. Theologians cannot claim any kind of monopoly on the knowledge of God nor to have access to a "better" knowledge of God. Healthy theological reflection at the academic level demands a constructive and critical engagement with the life of "ordinary" people of God, with the experience of the faithful (Mouw 1994; cf. for a non-theological parallel Servaes 1996:82). This does not erase, however, certain distinct characteristics of the knowledge of God and research of theologians. For intercultural theology, local Christians must be recognized as specialists in the area of their culture and the culturally relevant expression of their faith while the interaction with theologians is helpful to express and analyze their contribution to the broader (intercultural) theological

reflection – and *vice versa* (cf. Schreiter 1985:16–20; Munikwa and Hendriks 2011). This general theological consideration underpinning the participatory nature of theological reflection is even more apt in Africa and other non-Western parts of the world, where reflection in general and theological reflection in particular is a communal practice (Munikwa and Hendriks 2011:458–59), a practice which is effectively in line with the New Testament example of theological deliberation in Acts 15 (Hendriks 2003; cf. Bom forthcoming).

Thirdly, a Christian theology can only be truly catholic, if it engages with theological expressions and understandings originating from different parts of the world and different cultural contexts. This is true in principle, but is forced on us with greater clarity in our globalizing world (Walls 2002:3–26; Schreiter 1997).⁵ Healthy intercultural relationships demand that we deal with others not as research objects, but as partners and most often people that are themselves better equipped to understand their own situation than we are. They are not only dialogue partners in a participatory endeavor, but should be considered experts in the knowledge of the context to which the cross-cultural conversation partner remains an outsider and guest.

Practical Considerations with Specific Reference to “Science and Religion in French-Speaking Africa”

The Intrinsic Motivation of the Different Partners

If we want to engage in mutual dialogue and true conversation with Christian communities in other parts of the world, we need to engage in research projects that are of mutual interest and therefore are able to produce the energy, commitment and sustained interest needed. Purely “theoretical” interests may be of typically Western academic concern and often a luxury of a limited number of contexts and institutions with well-funded programs. Partners in the Global South will be more intrinsically interested in collaborative and dialogical projects if these projects respond to a clearly recognizable need or interest, such as the proclamation of the Christian message, engagement with social needs or the need to develop contextually appropriate forms of discipleship and healthy forms of leadership. In the course of our research project, it became increasingly clear that one of the crucial factors that made this project run smoothly and helped us in the collection of trustworthy data of a well-selected research population is the high level of interest and motivation in our

5 Consider for a non-theological parallel the focus on “democratic process” in knowledge production. (Reason and Bradbury 2006:1).

partner organization, the GBU-AF. This interest is particularly motivated by the desire to develop forms of discipleship within the university that move beyond an evangelistic presence to include academic involvement from a Christian perspective and to develop appropriate materials to help students and academics in their discipleship within a university context. The desire to feed regional insights in the relation between science and religion into the Western debate contributes to developing a sense of empowerment in addressing these questions, but is probably a stronger motivation for the Westerners partners in the joint project. It would be an interesting research undertaking to assess a range of intercultural research projects with regards to the influence of the nature of the motivation of the partners that are bringing in fewer financial resources. Does the question whether they are mainly intrinsically motivated or mainly motivated by financial incentives influence the selection, trustworthiness and quality of the data collected and of their interpretation? As Henk de Roest suggests, if the research population does not see themselves as partners in the project, this may lower the degree and depth of involvement, particularly if one fears that the data may be used in the interest of the researchers rather than the research population (de Roest 2015:248).

It would be dishonest to suggest that our project was a fully equal partnership. As Western researchers, we were in a better position to acquire funding and during the whole project the lion's share of the funds were managed from the Netherlands. We were only able to have an initial conversation with representatives of the stakeholders in sub-Saharan Africa before the project started. We needed to formulate the main research questions and research methodology before we had the funds to dialogue more elaborately with most of the local stakeholders, whom we could only meet during a research trip that was scheduled four months into the three-year project (see for similar challenges Walters and Popplewell 2013). However, the GBU-AF had a major voice in the concrete outworking of the project and we chose GMB as the tool for the first research meetings precisely because it allows the local participants to formulate their own understanding of the problem they are addressing. It would have been better if the initial research project had been formulated in a closer partnership. This would, however, only be possible if initial start-up funding would be available up-front and in the context of longer-lasting partnership. This seems to be an important *desideratum* for future research, but we do believe that a desire for ideological purity about what AR and PR could or should be should not limit us from setting important first steps in this direction in an academic world which is still characterized by unequal access to research funding and by many complexities in intercultural communication and partnership. Still better examples of PR could probably be developed with institutions that work in

close partnership with communities in their vicinity (see for examples Conde-Frazier 2012:237–40). This is, however, much harder in partnerships across large distances and with regions such as French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa which so far has limited local institutional academic strength and research capacity.

Envisaging Change

When a researcher or group of researchers engages in his or her research field, the engagement always produces change. This is particularly true of intercultural engagement. This is problematic in classical understandings of research in which “the relationship between researchers and researched (...) is a non-relationship in which the researcher is, as far as possible, neutral or invisible.” (Bergold and Thomas 2012: para. 38) We believe that this potential change due to intercultural engagement does not need to be avoided as a liability of intercultural research that should leave the research population as untouched and unperturbed as possible. This change should rather be recognized, critically used for the good, and welcomed.

Sometimes change is explicitly envisaged. As indicated, this will often be the case in intercultural research because non-Western partners will in most cases be interested in joint projects because of some practical need. In general, theological investigation in the non-Western world is more driven by practical concerns than in the Western world. In the West it can be driven by purely academically-motivated research programs, as is seldom the case in non-Western contexts. As such the project “Science and Religion in French-Speaking Africa” envisages (1) helping students and academics to be more truthful to the triune God and more relevant to their specific context in their discipleship in a personal calling that embraces both “scientific” and “religious” interests. It became clear from the research that these domains are not neatly separated for these students and academics, but that they perceive their studies and academic calling as part of a more embracing religious or more specifically Christian calling (Bom and van den Toren 2017). The project also envisages (2) empowering students and academics from French-speaking Africa to share their insights shaped by the particular confluence of cultural and religious influences that has shaped French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa both in their local context and in broader discussions concerning science and faith issues.

We were thus well aware that the African students, academics and student-workers were mainly interested in these topics because they wanted to explore new possibilities of Christian discipleship in the academic context and because they felt the need for critical reflection on the relationship between secular science and Christian faith. This did also include listening to our perspectives as

conversation partners and potentially even as mentors, so that they themselves could make up their mind and remain the “agents” of the change for which they hoped. We needed to carefully work out how this was going to be woven into the overall project. These interests could have adverse effects on the trustworthiness of our exploration of the existing practices and concerning the role of faith in their academic enterprise. We did, therefore, opt for GMB, because it would allow reconstructing the existing discourse with as little outside intervention as possible. We furthermore postponed sharing our own insights on science and faith until we had gathered the data needed to analyze the existing situation. Yet, we were aware that these practical objectives do not exclude a theoretical interest. Some of these theoretical interests may be directly linked to the practical outcomes envisaged. In this case a proper understanding and analysis of the current discourse amongst Christian students and academics is needed to find appropriate ways forward that are experienced as relevant and build on the insights already acquired. There are also wider theoretical interests that are not essential to the immediately-intended practical outcomes. One of the main objectives of our project is to contribute new insights from a so-far neglected cultural context to the global (or particularly Western) debate on science and religion.

Even if one would have mainly theoretical interests, one needs to question whether one can avoid practical intervention in a local situation and whether the effort to avoid all intervention is ethical – even though some would argue that refraining from all intervention would be the most ethical attitude. The researcher always represents a foreign element that will influence the local cultural dynamics. The questioning aimed at understanding raises itself issues that otherwise would have remained dormant. This becomes apparent in the theological interest that Mika Vähäkangas showed in the theology of healing of Rev. Ambilikile Mwasapile, a Lutheran pastor from Tanzania. The questions concerning the theology underpinning the latter’s healing ministry unavoidably led him to clarify his thinking on issues that might hitherto remain implicit (Vähäkangas 2016:273–74). In our own project the invitation to students and academics to take part in GMB sessions unavoidably forced them into formulating their understanding of science and religion issues, even if these issues so far had remained dormant. Even though as little as possible outside direction was given, the mutual sharing and questioning might bring issues to the fore and might expose tensions in their thinking that hitherto have been unacknowledged.

There is a further issue that is related to the role of the investigators. Social scientists and theologians are increasingly aware that the person of the

investigator, including his or her history and cultural baggage, is itself a primary “research tool” (Swinton 2012:81). This was evident in our project. The partnership between the research team and the GBU-AF could not have been developed if there was no trust that we fundamentally shared the same vision concerning the calling of Christian students and student movements within secular universities. This trust was strengthened by the fact that Benno van den Toren is a former staff worker of a sister movement of the GBU-AF in the Netherlands (IFES-NL, 1992–1996). Internationally, IFES movements tend to have a strong sense of shared calling and belonging to a worldwide fellowship. This does of course raise the question of academic “objectivity.” This is a far-ranging issue that surpasses the bounds of this article. Suffice to say that one could argue that true objectivity does not rest in the absence of commitments, but in openness to the world as it is (van den Toren 2011:120–53).

One also needs to ask whether the desire to leave the research population unchanged is ethical. To put it crudely, research projects in which one wants to disturb the research population as little as possible are more appropriate to the World Wildlife Fund than to the Christian community or to those who share a common humanity. This desire can even be based on a hidden patriarchal presupposition that we know what is good for others and want to protect them from unwanted outside influence. Intercultural theology will need to be more respectful of the interests and agency that the “research population,” or rather dialogue partners, might have in the relationship and project.

The Nature of Truth and the Desire for Change

Action research is developed and mostly used in view of practical outcomes. It can therefore have a pragmatic flavor (as exemplified in Conde-Frazier 2012). Action research can therefore easily suggest or align itself with the constructivist epistemology (or a largely constructivist epistemology) characteristic of our postmodern world (see for example Servaes 1996:82; Willms, Arratia, and Makondesa 2004:29). Christian practices are, however, not grounded in themselves, or in the manner in which a community engages with the world and gives itself order and meaning. Christian practices are always responses to the prior reality and work of God who, in Christ, has shown himself to be Redeemer and Lord (Achtmeier 1994; van den Toren 2011:16–18). Theological action research will therefore always want to anchor a growing understanding of Christian praxis in a growing understanding of God. It is grasped within the context of Christian practice, but “Ultimately, theological truth-claims rest on Christ’s claim ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life’ – truth embodied in a person.” (Cameron et al. 2010:17)

Christian theological participatory and action research can therefore not limit itself to a pragmatic focus on change, but will always combine its interest in healing and liberation with a desire to gain a deeper understanding of God and of God's project for his world – and therefore of what counts as true healing and liberation – revealed in Jesus Christ. These convictions were in our case shared by our partners and by most of the students and academics involved in the research project (Bom and van den Toren 2017). In our project, the general approach to the question concerned was that looking for a better understanding of the relationship between religion and science was not just a pragmatic interest aimed at improving how they as students and academics might live better lives in their challenging environments, or how they might contribute to the betterment of their communities. They were also interested in doing justice to both the nature of the world and the reality of God's salvific purposes in Christ and in understanding the value of both science and faith in understanding these realities as they are and in what they are for us. If as outside researchers, we had worked with a constructivist epistemology, supposing that their convictions are *no more* than mental constructs that help them cope with their worlds, it would have been much harder to engage in true dialogue. The distance that would need to be bridged would be so significant that there might be little interest in this partnership. Alternatively, if researchers had rather chosen to hide that fundamental difference and simply have adapted to the naïve or critical realism of the conversation partners for the sake of the project, there would have been no true conversation, and the “partners” would have become mere objects of research.

The difficulties of engaging in profound dialogue are of course not unique to researchers who work with a constructivist epistemology. Conversely, a theological researcher who believes that God has revealed himself most clearly in Jesus Christ would need to bridge a much greater distance when conversing with religious believers who believe that the divine is in principle beyond any human comprehension than researchers would who share this basic conviction. The larger the religious, cultural and epistemological gap, the harder it will be to nurture the commitment that allow for encounters and concrete projects in which true dialogue on a deep level is possible. This is one of the reasons why we need more traditional forms of cultural anthropological investigation that do not presuppose an interculturally-shared framework. The point we want to make here is simply that participatory research benefits from a fundamentally shared understanding with regards to the nature of a joint project and that such shared understanding may lead to a depth of dialogue that may otherwise remain beyond reach, either because of the lack of mutual understanding or because of a lack of sustained interest. Furthermore,

modern research projects based on a constructivist epistemology and understanding of culture may have some particular difficulties in this respect, because it presupposes an understanding of the (post)modern subject that does not sit well in a number of cultures that are less influenced by modernity in its Western form.⁶

On a more theoretical note, we need to be aware that every participatory action research project does presuppose some common understanding of what sort of action is worth pursuing, even while maintaining a significant level of openness to what fruitful change and worthwhile action in a particular community and context might look like. In practice, different partners may be pursuing goals that are of a very different nature: one partner may engage in the project because of the pragmatic or financial value of working together, without necessary sharing the “higher goals” of the other partner. It is, however, hard to imagine how such projects can become truly participatory as an expression of a shared seeking of human flourishing. This can only be the case if different partners share compatible understandings of human flourishing and/or if the question what such flourishing looks like is itself an intrinsic part of the intercultural conversation. In many encounters, either secular or inter-religious, we are invited “to inquire into what we mean by flourishing” (Reason and Bradbury 2006:11). There is a strong association between PR and AR and liberation theology (see for example Conde-Frazier 2012) and therefore with the corresponding convictions of what a better world would look like and what would be signs that we are moving in this direction. There is, however, no reason why PR and AR should be exclusively linked to narrowly defined liberation theologies. The question of what true human flourishing looks like, and what are its major obstacles, should itself be a theme in participatory research and intercultural theological conversations. What might AR for example look for from a Holiness Movement perspective, from a (neo-)Pentecostal perspective, from the perspective of African Initiated Churches, or from a Christian ascetic perspective? These unavoidable theological questions are obviously compounded by the fact that most Christian traditions believe in an eschatological flourishing beyond the end of life and of history as we know it and have different understandings of how this ultimate flourishing relates to the penultimate.

6 See the central position of “truth” (instead of knowledge) in the model built by the students from Abidjan: Bom and van den Toren 2017.

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摘要

本文探讨行动和参与式研究 (AR和PR) 在跨文化神学上的重要性。介绍了这些研究策略后, 文章提供了一个它们在跨文化神学中使用的神学原理: (1) 它们超越虚假的理论与实践神学的二分法; (2) 它们明白专业神学家是信徒团体的一部分, (3) 允许在跨文化交流中, 以“另一方”为研究伙伴, 而不仅仅是研究的对象。本文以一个研究项目为例, 考虑在非洲大学学生和学者中, 对科学与基督教信仰之间接口的态度, 文章考虑了三个在跨文化神学中对AR和PR的使用与价值的关键问题: (1) 跨文化研究项目中伙伴的内在动机, (2) 共同的变革远景的角色和 (2) 人类繁荣远景所隐含的真相问题。

Resumen

Este artículo examina la importancia de la Investigación de Acción y Participativa (AR y PR siglas en inglés) para la teología intercultural. Después de presentar estas estrategias de investigación, ofrece una justificación teológica para su uso en la teología intercultural: (1) van más allá de las falsas dicotomías entre la teología teórica y la práctica; (2) entienden a los teólogos profesionales como miembros de la comunidad de creyentes y (3) permiten encuentros interculturales que se acercan a “los otros” como socios y no como objetos de la investigación. Emplea el ejemplo de un proyecto de investigación que estudia las actitudes de estudiantes universitarios y académicos africanos hacia la relación entre la ciencia y la fe cristiana, el artículo considera tres cuestiones cruciales para el uso y el valor de AR y PR en la teología intercultural: (1) la motivación intrínseca de los socios para proyectos de investigación intercultural, (2) el papel de las visiones compartidas del cambio y (3) la cuestión de la verdad implícita en la mirada del progreso del ser humano.