

Course Outline

THEO5013 Theology and Empirical Research Methods

神學與經驗研究方法

2024 - 2025 Term 2

2.30pm – 5.15pm Theology Building (T31)

8/1, 15/1, 22/1, 5/2, 12/2, 19/2, 26/2, **5/3 (reading week)**, 12/3, 19/3, 26/3, 2/4, 9/4, 16/4

All assignments must be submitted to Blackboard & VERIGUIDE

No hardcopy is required

Course description

“Experience” and reflection on it have always been concerns for theologians, despite the diversity of theological traditions that prioritize various aspects of the formative factors for theology in their own ways. Furthermore, contemporary theologians and church leaders share a growing concern for a praxis that transforms both the world and the church. This requires theologians to understand experience as both a philosophical concept and a concrete social reality. Consequently, theologians are becoming increasingly interested in unique categories of empirical data relevant to theology and in research methodologies suited for analyzing this data. This interest is especially notable among practical theologians and empirical theologians, though not exclusively so.

As the editors of the Eerdmans series on Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography have stated, if theology is to impact the church and world today, theologians must learn to utilize empirical research tools for more **accurate, disciplined, and contextually grounded** research. In light of this, the course introduces students to various empirical research methods and data analytic tools to help them understand, evaluate, and conduct research relevant to theological studies. While the primary emphasis is on qualitative approaches, students will also learn how to critically read quantitative research reports. The course aims to provide a foundation for integrating theological inquiry with empirical research in a way that maintains the integrity of both fields and employs social scientific methods that are “theological all the way through,” as Helen Cameron has articulated. Students will be required to conduct a mini-study on selected issues in their home society or church by using one of the empirical research methods taught in the course.

儘管不同的神學傳統以不同角度看待各個神學構成元素的重要性，但「經驗」和對它的反思一直是神學家們關注的概念。此外，神學家和信徒越來越多參與在轉化社會的實踐中。這一切都要求神學家們不僅要在哲學和概念層面上理解經驗，也要從其社會性層面去把握。因此，神學家們對與神學有關的經驗數據類別和與分析這些數據有關的獨特研究方法，越來越感興趣。這對實踐神學家和經驗神學家來說，尤其如此，儘管這並不是他們的專利。

正如 Eerdmans 出版社的「教會學和民族學研究」系列主編所言，如果神學要對今天的教會和社會產生影響，神學家需要學懂運用經驗研究工具來提供更準確、更有嚴謹、更具處境性的研究。因此，本課程讓學生認識各種經驗研究方法和數據分析工具，協助他們理解、評估和進行與神學研究相關的經驗研究。本課程會重點介紹質性研究方法，但學生也將學習如何評論量化研究報告。本課程旨在為學生提供整合神學探究和經驗研究的基礎，其方式不僅要保持兩個學科的完整性，還要像 Helen Cameron 所說的那樣，以「神學貫穿始終」的方式運用社會科學方法。學生將被要求採用其中一種經驗研究方法對其所在社會/教會的選定問題進行一項小型研究。

Expected Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, students should be able to:

- Explain the role and importance of empirical research in theology.
- Exhibit a critical understanding of empirical research methods and their application to theological inquiry.
- Justify the preference for a particular empirical method when answering specific theological research questions.
- Differentiate between various qualitative research methodologies and explain their distinct features.
- Develop semi-structured interview guide suitable for in-depth oral interviews and focus group discussions.
- Conduct qualitative data analysis both manually and with software tools like NVivo.
- Describe the relationship between measurement and concept in research.
- Comprehend basic statistical language and its critical implications.
- Identify and incorporate necessary ethical considerations into empirical research designs.
- Formulate a theological problem that lends itself to qualitative research and construct an appropriate research design.
- Reflect theologically on empirical findings and integrate these findings into normative discourse.

Course syllabus

Topic	Contents/ fundamental concepts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of theology as addressing epochal, existential, and/or everyday questions • Why do theology students need to learn empirical research methods? • Modes of interaction between theological inquiry and empirical research methods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The idea of doing “Lived Theology,” and its history. • The history of the use of social scientific methods in theological research. • Examples of how empirical research can be used in theological inquiries—empirical theology and practical theology. • The principle of "theological all the way through": Helen Cameron’s Four Voices of Theology.
Qualitative approaches to inquiry	narrative, phenomenology and its variants, grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory, ethnography, case study, action research, etc
Methods in qualitative research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to formulate well-constructed, focused questions. • Understanding the role of theoretical frameworks in various qualitative research methodologies. • Techniques for data collection. • Methods of sampling. • Conducting qualitative interviews, including structured, semi-structured, unstructured, individual in-depth, and focus group interviews. • Engaging in field observations and practicing ethnography, including digital ethnography. • Analyzing, interpreting, and presenting qualitative data. • Applying various coding techniques, thematic analysis, theorization, and utilizing computer-assisted data analysis software. • Developing strategies for data interpretation, addressing issues of trustworthiness and validity.
Understanding the fundamentals of quantitative research	Key terms, design principles, formulation of research questions, hypotheses (incl. concepts of type I & II error), operationalization of concepts, instrument and questionnaire design, population and sample selection, common data analysis types (univariate, bivariate, and multivariate), and standard data analysis software like SPSS.

Critically analyzing quantitative research reports	Analyzing a selection of locally conducted quantitative research studies by Christian NGOs and Seminaries to identify common weaknesses, as a means to learn critical reading of empirical studies.
Applying mixed methods approaches in research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarifying what mixed methods research (MMR) entails and its applicability in theology. • Types of Mixed Methods Designs: Exploring various designs such as convergent, explanatory sequential, exploratory sequential, and embedded designs. • Choosing an Appropriate Design: Decision-making criteria based on the research questions and the context of theological research. • Developing Research Questions: Formulating questions that lend themselves to quantitative and qualitative methods.
Understanding and adhering to research ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to research ethics. • Process of obtaining consent. • Confidentiality and anonymity. • Vulnerable populations and cultural sensitivity. • Publishing and dissemination of findings. • Research misconduct.
Engaging in theological reflection on empirical findings	Understanding how to be consistently theological throughout research
Exploring the diverse applications of Gen-AI tools in empirical research	Use of Gen-AI tools for producing interview transcriptions, assisting in thematic analysis, and aiding in theorization, among other applications.

Course components

Teaching modes and learning activities	Percentage of time
Lectures (face-to-face)	30
Experimenting with Qualitative Research Studies	30
Self-Study	40

Assessment type, percentage and rubrics

Assessment type	Percentage
Book Report (select either one; length: 2500–4000 words) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cameron, Helen, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeny, and Clare Watkins. <i>Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology</i>. London: SCM, 2010. • Swinton, John, and Harriet Mowatt. <i>Practical Theology and Qualitative Research</i>. 2nd, rev. edition. London: SCM, 2016. • Ward, Pete, and Knut Tveitereid, eds. <i>The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research</i>. Wiley Blackwell Companions to Religion. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022. Pp. 1–78; 371–458. 	35
Conducting a mini-research project and presenting the findings	35
A research proposal (qualitative approach; length: 4–10 pages of A4 paper)	30

* *The submission deadline for all assignments is April 30, 2025*

Assessment rubrics

The book report is an integral part of the coursework, making up 35% of the total score. Students are expected to provide a thorough analysis of the chosen text, demonstrating their understanding of the material.

Criteria Breakdown

Content Understanding (30%)

- Demonstrates a deep understanding of the book's themes, arguments, and theological implications.
- Accurately connects theological concepts with empirical research methods.

Analysis and Critical Thinking (30%)

- Provides insightful analysis of the text, going beyond mere summary.
- Critically evaluates the arguments and methods discussed in the book, using relevant theological and empirical research concepts.

Organization and Structure (15%)

- Presents information in a logical, clear, and coherent manner.
- Uses a clear introduction, body, and conclusion to guide the reader.

Use of Evidence (10%)

- Supports assertions with evidence from the book and other scholarly sources.
- Integrates quotations and references effectively and appropriately.

Writing Quality (10%)

- Uses clear, concise, and scholarly language appropriate for a theology course.
- Is free of grammatical and spelling errors.

Formatting and References (5%)

- Adheres to proper formatting guidelines throughout the report.

Performance Levels

5 - Exemplary (90-100% of criteria)

- Demonstrates exceptional understanding and insight into the book's content.
- Analysis is deep, showing high-level critical thinking and originality.
- The report is exceptionally well-organized, with a logical flow and clear argumentation.
- Evidence is rich, well-integrated, and strengthens the analysis.
- Writing is of publishable quality, with no errors.
- Flawless citation style.

4 - Proficient (70-89% of criteria)

- Shows a solid understanding of the book with accurate connections to course material.
- Analysis is thorough, with evidence of critical thinking and clear reasoning.
- Report structure is clear, with a discernible beginning, middle, and end.
- Uses evidence effectively, though integration could be smoother.
- Writing is clear and professional with minimal errors.
- Formatting is mostly correct with minor errors.

3 - Satisfactory (50-69% of criteria)

- Demonstrates adequate understanding but may miss some nuances of the book's arguments.
- Analysis is present but may lack depth or originality.
- The organization is apparent, but transitions may be lacking or clarity could be improved.
- Uses some evidence, but it may not be well connected to the argument.
- Writing is generally clear but may have some errors.
- Formatting is attempted, but several errors are present.

2 - Developing (30-49% of criteria)

- Shows basic understanding of the book but with significant inaccuracies.
- Attempts analysis, but it is superficial or confused.
- The organization is weak, making the report difficult to follow.
- Evidence is sparse or poorly utilized.
- Writing has frequent errors that distract from the content.
- Formatting has many errors and lacks adherence to referencing style guide.

1 - Beginning (<30% of criteria)

- Demonstrates little understanding of the book's content and relevance to the course.
- Analysis is missing or entirely off-topic.
- Lacks coherent structure, with no clear organization.
- Insufficient use of evidence, or evidence is entirely absent.
- Writing is unclear and riddled with errors.
- Formatting is incorrect or not attempted.

Notes for Students

- The book report must be submitted by the due date to avoid late penalties.
- Plagiarism will not be tolerated and will result in a score of zero for the assignment.
- Please ensure that you choose a book approved by the course instructor.

Core and recommended readings

Core readings:

- Cameron, Helen, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeny, and Clare Watkins. *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology*. London: SCM, 2010.
- Creswell, John W., and Cheryl N. Poth. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. Fourth edition. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018.
- Marsh, Charles, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky, eds. *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- McLemore, Bonnie J., ed. *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*. West Sussex, UK: Blackwell, 2014. Part II.
- Swinton, John, and Harriet Mowatt. *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*. 2nd, rev. edition. London: SCM, 2016.
- Ven, Johannes A. van der. *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach*. Translated by Barbara Schultz. Leuven: Peeters, 1998.

Recommended readings:

- Berthold, Fred, and Bernard Eugene Meland, eds. *The Future of Empirical Theology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969.
- Bickman, Leonard, and Debra J. Rog, eds. *The SAGE Handbook of Applied Social Research Methods*. 2nd edition. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009.
- Black, Thomas R. *Doing Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences: An Integrated Approach to Research Design, Measurement and Statistics*. Reprinted. London: SAGE, 2005.
- Cameron, Helen, and Catherine Duce. *Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission: A Companion*. London: SCM, 2013.
- Creswell, John W., and Cheryl N. Poth. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. 4th edition. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018.
- Creswell, John W., and J. David Creswell. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 5th edition. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018.
- Dillen, Annemie, and Robert Mager. "Research in Practical Theology. Methods, Methodology, and Normativity." In *Invitation to Practical Theology: Catholic Voices and Visions*, edited by Claire E. Wolfteich, 301–28. New York: Paulist, 2014.
- Eichhorn, Jan. *Survey Research and Sampling*. The SAGE Quantitative Research Kit. Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2021.
- Francis, Leslie J., Mandy Robbins, and Jeff Astley, eds. *Empirical Theology in Texts and Tables Qualitative, Quantitative and Comparative Perspectives*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2009.

Goode, J., Lumsden, K., & Bradford, J. (Eds.). (2023). *Crafting autoethnography: Processes and practices of making self and culture*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

Iyadurai, J. (2023). *Social research methods: For students and scholars of theology and religious studies*. Chennai, India: Marina Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Religion.

Jackson, Kristi. *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo*. 3rd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2019.

Macintosh, Douglas Clyde. *Theology as an Empirical Science*. New York: Arno, 1980.

McNiff, Jean. *Action Research: Principles and Practice*. 3rd edition. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2013.

Miles, Matthew B., A. M. Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. 4th edition. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2020.

Scharen, Christian, ed. *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012.

Ward, Pete, ed. *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012.

Williams, Malcolm, Richard Wiggins, and Paul R. Vogt. *Beginning Quantitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2022.

Wolfteich, Claire E., ed. *Invitation to Practical Theology: Catholic Voices and Visions*. New York: Paulist Press, 2014.

Feedback for evaluation: Students are encouraged to make use of the Early Feedback Collection System to share their feedback in the middle of the semester. Course instructor will also take seriously the course evaluation exercise findings.

Contact details:

Professor:	
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Academic honesty and plagiarism

Attention is drawn to University policy and regulations on honesty in academic work, and to the disciplinary guidelines and procedures applicable to breaches of such policy and regulations. Details may be found at <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/>.

With each assignment, students are required to submit a signed **declaration** that they are aware of these policies, regulations, guidelines and procedures.

- For assignments in the form of a computer-generated document that is principally text-based and submitted via VeriGuide, the statement, in the form of a receipt, will be issued by the system upon students' uploading of the soft copy of the assignment.
- Students should be fully aware that their work may be investigated by AI content detection software to determine originality.
- Students are fully aware of the AI approach(es) adopted in the course. In the case where some AI tools are allowed, students have made proper acknowledgment and citations as suggested by the course teacher.

Only the final version of the assignment should be submitted via VeriGuide.

The submission of a piece of work, or a part of a piece of work, for more than one purpose (e.g. to satisfy

the requirements in two different courses) without declaration to this effect shall be regarded as having committed undeclared multiple submissions. It is common and acceptable to reuse a turn of phrase or a sentence or two from one's own work; but wholesale reuse is problematic.

Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen-AI) Tools

We are adopting the third approach as suggested by the CUHK guidelines, namely: Use of AI tools is allowed with explicit acknowledgment and proper citation.

In addition, students are encouraged to chat with AI tools to formulate and polish the ideas they want to advance in their assignments.