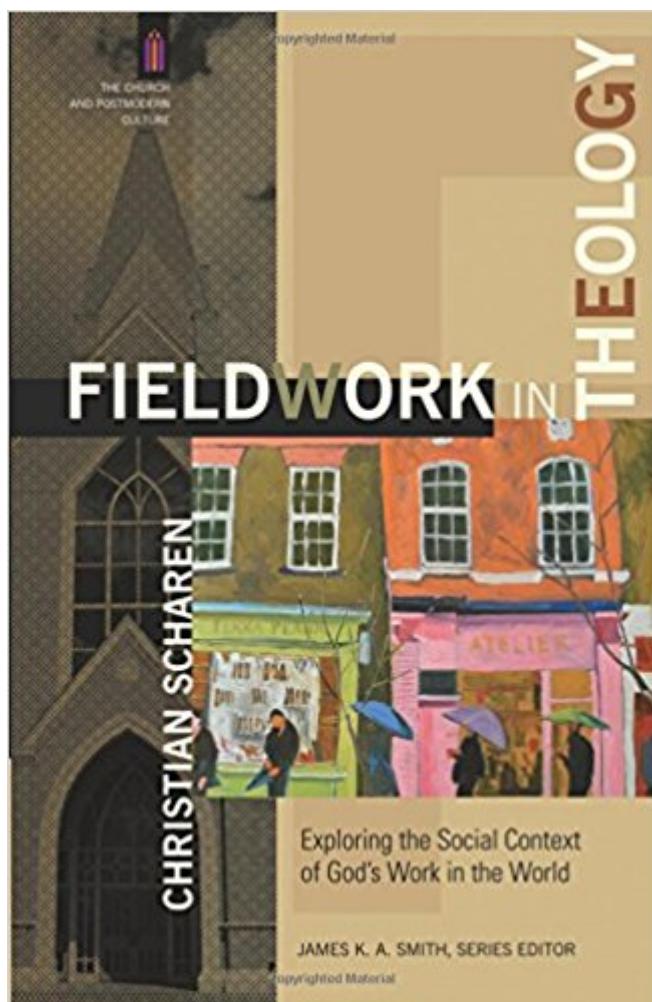


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# Fieldwork In Theology: Exploring The Social Context Of God's Work In The World (The Church And Postmodern Culture)



## Synopsis

In this addition to the acclaimed The Church and Postmodern Culture series, leading practical theologian Christian Scharen examines the relationship between theology and its social context. He engages with social theorist Pierre Bourdieu to offer helpful theoretical and theological grounding to those who want to reflect critically on the faith and practice of the church, particularly for those undertaking ministry internships or fieldwork assignments. As Scharen helps a wide array of readers to understand the social context of doing theology, he articulates a vision for the church's involvement with what God is doing in the world and provides concrete examples of churches living out God's mission.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"If you are interested in learning to read 'the world' and discern how God is at work in it, this simple book by one of today's finest practical theologians is an excellent place to start. Together with Pierre Bourdieu, whose work he tries to make fruitful for theological ethnography, Scharen argues that reading the world well requires 'conversion of the way we look at other people in the ordinary circumstances of life.'"--Miroslav Volf, founding director, Yale Center for Faith and Culture, Yale Divinity School; author of *A Public Faith*"Fieldwork in Theology is remarkable in originality and scope. It combines a sophisticated parsing of social science theory with deep theological reflection to produce something that transcends both. Christian Scharen delivers an impassioned call for a carnal theology that seeks a disciplined understanding of the social world. Fieldwork in Theology

deserves to be read by all who would seek to ground theology in the complexity of lived context."--Omar M. McRoberts, associate professor of sociology, University of Chicago; author of *Streets of Glory: Church and Community in a Black Urban Neighborhood*"Christian Scharen marks a turning point in practical theology by arguing for the central place of qualitative empirical research in the study of the Christian church via a detailed engagement with continental philosophy. This book is an essential read for all of those embarking on ethnographic research in theology."--Pete Ward, professorial fellow in ecclesiology and ethnography, Durham University; author of *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*"This book is not only for practical theologians, Christian anthropologists, and missiologists, but for all working in the guild of theological studies who realize that reconstructing Christian meaning today is impossible without somehow going fully 'native' in the many concrete contexts of our contemporary global village. Beyond understanding 'the field,' our continental philosophical interlocutors may even activate theologically informed practices that make a redemptive difference in the present time."--Amos Yong, director, Center for Missiological Research, Fuller Theological Seminary; author of *Spirit of Love*

Christian Scharen (PhD, Emory University) is vice president of applied research at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City, New York. He has authored a number of books, including *One Step Closer*, and is the book review editor of *Ecclesial Practices*.

This is a fascinating and constructive interdisciplinary guide for creatively integrating theological reflection with qualitative method in sociology. At first the discrete elements of the book may appear disparate: exploration of meaning through contemporary songs, theological reflections on contemporary culture, and exploration of the theological value of recent trends in sociology, especially the school of Pierre Bourdieu. Yet the juxtaposition of these elements by Christian Scharen constructs a captivating matrix for enriching theology through deep participation in a sociologically-informed, embodied practice of engaging particular human communities. The specific references to contemporary songs at the beginning of chapters not only establish specific thematic lines of inquiry, but moreso suggest a posture of appreciative inquiry for correlating cultural artifacts with theological reflection. Scharen employs carefully selected references to the work of contemporary theologians, particularly drawing on the insights of Rowan Williams (for example, the meaning of being sent into mission as a "dispossession," of sin as the occasion for self-critique, of theology as a practice "in the middle of things," or of worship, particularly Eucharist, as the means for forming community in service to others according to the way of Jesus), to provide theological

mediation for his entire project. The most noteworthy achievement of this book is the accessible, yet substantial introduction to the qualitative sociological methods of Bourdieu, alongside the thought of other significantly related figures, who assist in explicating and appreciating Bourdieu's contributions--Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, and Wacquant, among others. Scharen writes: "Here we see Bourdieu building a mode of scientific work grounded in fieldwork. Precisely, because of the problems he confronts in the field, he must therefore overcome antinomies such as objective-subjective and social/mental. His core concepts . . . of habitus and field, along with others, emerge at just this juncture" (73). Most stunning about this brief monograph are the implications drawn at book's conclusion for the promise of incorporating fieldwork, practiced thusly, into theological method, especially in relation to the study of congregations: "a posture of love leaning over toward the other and seeking to listen, hear, and understand the experience of the other" (109). In an exquisite, although brief, Epilogue the author names such effort at understanding others as a "spiritual exercise" that incorporates these key elements: "listening well; crafting careful, open-ended questions; offering assurances of care and confidentiality; and putting people at ease in every possible way" (113). Such constitutes a habitus not only worthy for the embodied practice of ethnographers but perhaps all the more for the enrichment of theological teaching and learning through the formation of theological practitioners skilled for engaging in such fieldwork.

This is the weakest book I have read in the otherwise excellent Church and Postmodern Culture series. It fails to drive home any conclusions and is strictly for sociologists and theologians.

In an age when giving and attendance at traditional Christian services is rapidly dwindling, how can church leaders figure out what their people want and how to connect it theologically? Rev. Dr. Christian Schaaren, Vice President of Applied Research at Auburn Seminary, provides a readable and theoretically grounded argument for why pastors and theologians ought to be doing fieldwork in their communities and congregations. Schaaren interweaves pop performances with a thorough yet accessible summary of French theoreticians like Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty. His essential message is that theology is not a collection of beliefs to be mentally checked off, but a habitus of living within a particular social structure that it behooves leaders to investigate deeply. More than that, it can be a spiritual practice of listening meaningfully to the Other both inside and outside the church. Schaaren skillfully weaves Continental philosophy and theology together in a way that enriches both. Note: if you're looking for a step-by-step process to do fieldwork in a congregation, this is not your book. But in many ways, that's kind of the point. Schaaren and

his interlocutors insist that good fieldwork comes out of deep, rich quantitative work and even explicit participation in your subjects social world. Since God's primary act was to give Jesus to us so that we could participate in that ongoing gift of love, it is our mission in return to give the gift of listening and understanding to others in community. Realizing the flawed nature of the church and of our scientific disciplines, we can retrain ourselves through the gift of the Holy Spirit to perform Jesus in our everyday lives. That is good news both for the church and for the world. Schaaren's concluding sentence says it best: *Here, in the holy moment of deep silence, listening to another find words for the experiences of his or her life*"lovely or horrible or more likely some mixture of both"the whole practice of research is subsumed by our participation in listening as God does, the God who bends near to hear our cries.

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