Over the last few years, practice theory has become a central point of reference in sociological discussion. Without defining a homogeneous theoretical field, the various approaches of practice theory have given new impetus to the debate on the nature of the social and have significantly influenced research in other disciplines of cultural studies as well.

Also within Practical Theology, there is now increasing use of practice-theoretical frameworks to develop promising research designs and to approach religion in new ways. The volume “Practice, Practice Theory and Theology. Scandinavian and German Perspectives” takes these references as an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the potential of practice theory for theological research. Edited by Kirstine Helboe Johansen and Ulla Schmidt, the volume compiles twelve contributions addressing theoretical, analytical, and methodological implications of practice theories.

The book is divided into two sections. Part one “Practice in Theology” deals with more theoretical issues. The six chapters (with articles by Ulla Schmidt, Frank Hillebrandt, Geir Afdal, Jan-Olav Henriksen, and Johannes van Oorschot) examine the social ontology that practice theories conceive, common principles of analysis, and conceptual punch lines. Part two “Studying Practice as Theology” (with articles by Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen, Linn Sæbø Rystad, Kirstine Helboe Johansen, Torsten Cress, Line Marschner, and Johansen and Schmidt) provides six case studies of different practices and discusses the contribution of practice theories to the study of religion in terms of concrete empirical research. A concise introduction draws readers into the articles and outlines initial features of a perspective that observes religion as practice.

One of the main theses of the book is that the concept of practice does not merely address one dimension of religion among others. In the context of practice theory, it rather calls for a different understanding of religion as a whole. The papers in the first part of the book attempt to unfold basic contours of such an under-
standing and in doing so, relevant conceptions of practice theory are reconstructed, but also the consequences of a strong concept of practice are brought into conversation with historical debates in theology and critically applied to established paradigms of practical-theological research, such as that of communication. In my opinion, the first part of the book succeeds in an exemplary way in elaborating central points of a practice-theoretical approach to religion: the claim of subverting common dichotomies, for example between agency and structure, “macro” and “micro,” knowledge and action, inner and outer, body and soul, etc. is presented in detail; the relevance of materiality, both in terms of the body and in terms of artefacts, is emphasized; the performative character of practice is reflected, according to which practices do not only express beliefs, emotions, and knowledge, but also generate beliefs, emotions, and knowledge, and produce the world of the social and religious life in the first place; and also the important insight into the complex entanglements of practices is addressed, according to which a clear separation of specific social domains always represents a simplification, which makes an understanding of religious practices all too difficult.

Practice theories are contributions to social theory, but they also intend to develop a heuristic that stimulates empirical research. As a conceptual network that makes certain phenomena observable, it aims at qualitative research of social practices that is primarily committed to methods of participant observation, but can also take interview methods into account, as in particular Torsten Cress points out in this volume. Against this background, it is more than appropriate to reflect on the potential of practice-theoretical approaches also in the context of concrete empirical studies on religion. Although the individual chapters (on congregational teaching and learning, preaching for children, Halloween worship services, devotion practices, church architecture, and public church) do not all seem to me to take up the stimulating impulses of a practice-theoretical lens in the same consistent way, the contributions throughout demonstrate the relevance of an understanding of religion that does not start with people and their actions, but with practices in which bodies and their senses participate just as much as spaces and their objects, and which include affective states and mental activities to the same extent as they involve the various materialities of social reality.

Altogether, the volume is not only to be recommended to those who are turning to practice theories for the first time. Those who have been dealing with religion for a longer time in the horizon of a strong concept of practice will also get a wealth of ideas from the chapters. What is particularly well done here is not only the dual focus on both concrete research programs and questions concerning an ontology of the social, the concept of religion, and an understanding of theology. The entirely unpretentious and self-evident combination of theological and sociological voices as well as “Scandinavian and German Perspectives” highly enriches the volume.