

**Ethnography and Theology  
A Critical Roundtable Discussion**

by Don Saliers, Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger,  
Dianne Stewart Diakité, and Don E. Seeman

In the spring of 2009, *Practical Matters*, with the assistance of the Initiative in Religious Practices & Practical Theology, held a consultation in Atlanta on the theme of “Ethnography and Theology.” This consultation illustrated the extent to which this topic represents an overlap and convergence of a number of different commitments, methods, and disciplinary frameworks. We think it is important to represent the complex texture of this conversation for the readers and viewers of this issue. To that end, we offer the following short pieces from four scholars whose perspectives reflect some of the diverse disciplines, commitments, and methods animating the intersections of ethnography and theology:

“On Some Relations Between Theology and Ethnography,” by Don E. Saliers

“The Limits of Ethnography: Notes from the Field,” by Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger

“The Limits of Theology: Notes from a Theographer,” by Dianne M. Stewart Diakité

“Does Anthropology Need to ‘Get Religion’? Critical Notes on an Unrequited Love,” by Don Seeman

As conversation starters, these four pieces serve as an invitation to you, our readers, to add your voices to this emerging conversation. Your responses, comments, and questions will be made available to other readers through an online discussion forum moderated by *Practical Matters* staff and archived as part of Issue 3.

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***On Some Relations Between Theology and Ethnography***

*Don E. Saliers, Emory University*

There can be little doubt that ethnographic study of the practices in faith communities is now making a significant contribution to theological reflection. It is one thing to speak of **what** religious traditions believe and hold as truth claims about God, the world, and humanity. It is another thing to uncover and to describe **how** specific communities of faith experience and live those beliefs. It is one thing to give a normative account of the theological doctrines that constitute the norms of a religious group; it is another to offer a close and detailed description of that group's actual practices and patterns of discourse about God, the world, and their lives. Theology without concrete access to how believers live can be empty; mere description of behaviors and events can be theologically blind. It is precisely the relationships between the normative and the descriptive, and between theological doctrines and the lived experience of faith (or, how communities negotiate their beliefs in life) that are at stake. The work of Christian theology, as I understand it now, will not be fully relevant or faithful unless it has access to the particularities of what it is to be a theological community in multiple contexts, perhaps especially in our increasingly diasporic and hybridic religious situation.

My own form of theological work has been in liturgical theology. A simple definition of this form of theological thinking is Alexander Schmemmann's "the elucidation of the meaning of worship."<sup>1</sup> Even more to the point, such theological reflection looks to the actual ritual and ethical practices of a community for manifestations of "primary theology." Critical reflection on these primary phenomena is thus an enriched "second order" genre of thinking. Liturgical theology holds together both primary and secondary "languages" about the human and divine encounter.

Liturgical studies, at least in its reinvigorated forms in the last century, began largely as a historical and textual domain of inquiry. Much attention was given to comparative ancient rites and to various forms of philological and formal textual analysis. The emergence of liturgical theology was itself dominated by conceptual inquiry concerning key terms such as *anamnesis*, *epiclesis*, *anaphora*, and the relationship of liturgical prayer to theological doctrines. All this began to change dramatically with the discovery of several "neighboring disciplines," when attention gradually turned to questions of indigenization of the liturgy and to the phenomena of living liturgical traditions of practice.

Enter ethnographic, ritual, and performance studies. The most important recent work in liturgical studies is generated by the interface of these disciplinary fields. It is now difficult to imagine that, for centuries, considerations about the sacraments of the Roman Catholic tradition proceeded solely on theological grounds without attention to the actual liturgical contexts in which sacraments are celebrated. That, too, has changed remarkably; and the advent of more descriptive approaches to how liturgies are performed and to the dynamics of participation and leadership in

1 Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1966)

worshipping assemblies is at the heart of the matter.

One of the openings toward the fruitful dialogue between ethnography and liturgy was prompted by a classical theological claim itself, namely, the *famous lex orandi, lex credendi* slogan—“the rule of prayer founds the rule of believing.” This motto, a highly condensed version of the more ancient formulation by Prosper of Aquitaine—*legem credendi statuat supplicanti* (let the rule or law of prayer establish the rule of belief)—led subsequent liturgical theologians to distinguish between “primary” and “secondary” theology. The “primary theology” is enacted in the liturgical celebration itself. If this is true, we must raise the question of what actually constitutes the “praying.” In other words, what forms, patterns, and experiential features of the assembly’s participation constitute the ritual actions and the prayers of any given worshipping assembly? How are we to gain such knowledge?

A second opening comes from the old scholastic distinction between *ex opera operato* (the efficacy of the rite itself) and the *operantis* (the fruitfulness of the rite in human lives]). Often the accent was solely on the “objective” efficacy of the ritual action, with little attention to the character or quality of the participation of the faithful. There are always consequences in human lives of the “doing of ritual.” Here the accent falls on the whole range of affective states, attitudes and dispositions formed and expressed by the liturgical actions. Indeed, the “something done ritually” (*ex opera*) cannot be understood apart of access to the *operantis*.

But well beyond these analytic openings to the role of ethnographic study, is the powerful fact that liturgy is always culturally embedded and embodied. Moreover, we now come to theological reflection within any given tradition knowing that there are always cross-influences between traditions within and among living religions today.

New dimensions of the “theological” meaning of rites, texts, ethical and moral behavior—and the ways these are elicited, sustained, and reformed—have come into being. This is also true of the “poetics” and the “aesthetics” of theological inquiry. These features of theological inquiry include but also go beyond the confines of liturgical theology. Nothing short of a perspicuous description of the larger “world” of religious life can adequately yield these dimensions of theological meaning and significance. Because the language of theology requires that which is not language (behavior, will, perception, images, time, space, sight, sound, and the gesturing body) in order for language about God to have meaning and point, theology needs detailed study of these phenomena in actual communities. This is one important way to state the vital linkage between ethnographic work and theological interpretation.

***The Limits of Ethnography: Notes from the Field****Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, Emory University*

Once a year as the days heat up towards the height of summer in the south Indian town of Tirupati, the village goddess Gangamma makes herself known over her week-long festival through a series of forms, including male human forms taking her guises (*vesham*) and becoming her. I have attended this festival four times and have, quite literally, taken hundreds of photographs. But a few images, in particular, have caught my imagination and have raised for me questions about the limits of ethnography as a methodology and of an ethnographic understanding of experience. These are photographs of men from a particular ritual family who have, through guising, become the goddess, and who are worshipped *as* the goddess. The photographs that are particularly poignant are those in which the guised man-become-goddess is shown in some kind of interaction with members of his family. Two photographs catch one of the guises of the goddess as s/he's taking a lunch break from her ritual perambulations of Tirupati's old neighborhoods. His wife is feeding him cool curd rice and his little girl, only a toddler, is sitting on his lap. What does the little girl experience as she sits on the lap of her father who is the goddess? What are the long-term implications



A little girl sits in the lap of Matangi Gangamma, who is the goddess, but also--when unguised--the girl's father.

Photo by Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger



The goddess Gangamma in her Matangi guise, fully garlanded and with turmeric powder applied to her face, as she makes her ritual rounds of Tirupati's traditional neighborhoods. The red on her hands and sari is vermilion powder that she both accepts from and distributes to householders who greet her at their doorways.

Photo by Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger

of witnessing her father as goddess in her experience and conceptualizations of gender? Another photograph shows a wife worshipping at the feet of her husband-become-goddess. When I asked whether she, at that moment, thought of him/her as her husband or as the goddess, she immediately replied, "Only the goddess." But what she did not answer, and perhaps is unable to answer discursively, is whether or how this experience of her husband-become-goddess affects their relationship and/or her understandings of the possibilities of gender transformation.

These image-vignettes suggest some of the limits of ethnography: the serendipitous circum-

stances of much ethnographic research/data, the consequences of the time limits of ethnographic research, the limits of discourse (including the ability to articulate nonverbal knowledge), and finally, the limits of translation.

Presumably, the goal of an ethnographer is to understand the social, political, religious/ritual and imaginative worlds within which the persons s/he is working with live. To fully understand the world of the goddess Gangamma and her worshippers and ritual practitioners requires an ethnographer both to imagine and to try to articulate a world in which the goddess has agency, a goddess whose needs can be fulfilled through human ritual and devotion. An ethnographer working with this goddess tradition does not him/herself have to accept that the goddess has agency; but in order to understand the tradition and community that lives within it, it is incumbent upon the ethnographer to try to imagine a world in which she does. Perhaps this empathetic imagination is what religious studies and theology can contribute most significantly to ethnography.

An ethnographer cannot be at all places all the time; hence, often, particular meetings with particular actors as well as statements by those actors feel (or are) serendipitous. For example, in 1992, the first year I attended Gangamma's annual festival, women were serving her in her temple. The next year I learned that the women attendants had been evicted and replaced by Brahmin (male) priests. This was a major shift; and yet if I had not personally witnessed this transition, I would have likely assumed that the goddess had always been served by Brahmin men and would have missed the beginning of a middle-class transformation of the temple and its rituals. Because we had seen this transition from middle- and low-caste female attendants to Brahmin male attendants, we were able to speak to its participants about their experience of it; but it was not a topic that those remaining at the temple brought up themselves.

Another example of serendipity: I asked a sweeper woman at the guesthouse where I was staying whether or not she was afraid of this particular goddess, Gangamma, who is known to be *ugram* (excessive, with high demands), as many men I had spoken to seemed to be. The woman answered, "No. She has *shakti* [female spiritual power] and we [women] have *shakti*, so we're not afraid. But men, they don't have *shakti*; so they are afraid." This unexpected comment has helped



The Matangi guise of the goddess taking a lunch break in her perambulations, having removed her garlands. Exhausted from hours of walking in the heat of summer, he (now more the male who's taken the guise than fully the goddess) is being fed cooling yogurt rice by his wife.

Photo by Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger

to frame the work I have written about this goddess tradition—that is, that there is a gendered experience of the goddess. But I often wonder what would have been the propelling question and framework of my writing had I *not* met this woman and heard this comment, which was a contextualization cue for an indigenous understanding of the tradition and which caused me to hear and see other comments and rituals through a particular interpretive lens.

To return to the photographs: the question of what effect a goddess-father may have on his young daughter may not have occurred to me in quite this way had I not been present at the lunch-break in which the two interacted (which I had not seen during two previous festivals). A good ethnographer puts him/herself in situations in which s/he will hear and pay attention to comments and images like this—if not this one, then others. Nevertheless, serendipity—including invitations extended and accepted, cups of tea (and potential conversation) shared or declined, unexpected meetings, and seemingly offhand or casual questions and comments—constitutes both the joys and benefits, as well as a potential limit, of ethnographic research.

A second limiting characteristic of ethnography is its time-bounded nature. That is, ethnography catches traditions and persons in the particular time-frame of the scholar's fieldwork. The little girl pictured on her father-goddess's lap is now an English-medium middle school student, and the education she is receiving may affect her experiences and articulations of gender and the rituals she has witnessed yearly since the photograph was taken. Repeated returns to the field over several years, cultivating an awareness for potential sites for change, and writing to leave room for these potential changes are a few of the ways to account for the limits of time-bounded fieldwork. To live in a community through seasonal and annual cycles also helps to mitigate other kinds of constraints of time-bounded fieldwork; so that, for example, the ethnographer is aware of the changing rhythms of days, weeks, months and seasons in a particular community and does not over-generalize a phenomenon that may be season-specific (such as foods eaten or kinds of flowers used in ritual).

One of the most significant limits of ethnography is the limit of discourse itself, both for the members of an ethnographic community and for the ethnographer him/herself. Ethnographic writing often attempts to bridge the gaps between experience and discourse. The body of the goddess-husband's wife may *know* and experience gender in a particular way that the wife and the community within which she lives do not have discursive ways of talking about. An awareness of narrative, performative, and gestural repertoires and conversations around such experience help an ethnographer to find words and indigenous expressions of that experience; but in the end, body knowledge and discursive knowledge are difficult to translate one to the other.

This brings us to the limits of translation itself. Ethnography is a multi-level translation: of experience to discourse; of indigenous/everyday discourse to academic discourse, often from one language to another; and from description to analysis. Each level of translation is a creative, but limited act, with potential pitfalls. The limits of ethnography and translation encourage, for those of us engaged in this process, a generous dose of humility.

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***The Limits of Theology: Notes from a Theographer***

*Dianne M. Stewart Diakité, Emory University*

The term *theology* can convey different degrees and modes of god-talk depending upon the contexts in which it is used. For some it amounts to a confession of faith or a statement of religious convictions and beliefs. For others it involves rigorous inquiry and mastery of a body of knowledge related to the formal teachings of a religious tradition and scholastic reflection upon that tradition's core doctrines. Theology's long career in the Western academy has made it nearly impossible for many to conceive of "theology" without the modifier "Christian," and, in pondering the "limits of theology," it is to this established scholastic heritage that I refer.

As a theologian who studies diverse African religious cultures, inclusive of but not restricted to varieties of Christian faith, the limits of theology are immediately apparent when theological reflection is assumed to be an exclusively Christian exercise. However, theological reflection imposes other limits upon the study of religious experience as much as it illumines and explores opaque dimensions of human subjectivity and the human spirit. One such limit maps the distance between official or scholarly theological discourses and popular theologies that emerge in contexts where religious convictions are lived and contested. For centuries conceptual, armchair approaches to theological reflection in the West were sufficient for producing official and scholarly theologies intended for ecclesial and academic audiences. Theological discourse of this kind was penned mostly by socially privileged White males and made virtually no attempt to engage the theological imagination of lay persons and marginalized communities.

During the last half of the twentieth century, however, the discipline of Christian theology became self-conscious about postmodern preoccupations, including social oppression, diversity in the human experience, the challenge in reconciling universal and particular concerns in theological construction, global expressions of Christianity, and the significance of culture in shaping religious beliefs and practices. As contextual, liberation, postmodern, postcolonial, and indigenous theologies began to challenge mainstream theologies for either reinforcing or ignoring racism, sexism, imperialism, classism, and heterosexism in the church and society, they expanded the sources and hermeneutical lenses for theological thinking to include suppressed voices, marginalized standpoints, and stigmatized cultural traditions.

Engaging the theological perspectives of people on the ground compelled theologians to move beyond and at times abandon conventional epistemological and methodological resources of the discipline. In my case it has demanded repositioning my research in between the conceptual preoccupations of theology and the methodological tools of ethnography.<sup>1</sup> As a result, my scholarship

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**1** Some of the approaches to data collection that I have found invaluable include taking field notes, participant observation, and semi-structured/unstructured interviews. Grounded theory and attentiveness to reflexivity, insider/outsider locations, and emic and etic categories have led me to engage in more disciplined studies of the broader religious cultures in which theological reasoning takes place—for the theologizing community

approximates the content and form of what my graduate school colleague Sally Cuffee termed “theography” as we struggled to name the novel steps womanist theologians were taking in their alternative approaches and foci. Some of us were indeed emerging *theographers* whose encounters with Black women’s lived religion brought us face-to-face with practices and experiences that tested the limits of the conventional theological categories most familiar to us at the time.

An example from my own research experiences in Jamaica might serve to illustrate the limits of “theology” as customarily conceived and the potential of theography to address the preoccupations of contextual theological (or theographic) reflection. Contextual theologies address social location and offer analysis of the concrete historical horizons that shape the theological imagination and religious life of persons and communities. Among traditions with little emphasis on theological writing, accessing these sources demands ethnographic encounters in landscapes of lived religion. Where religion is lived and experienced, “theologies” are often embedded in other kinesthetic and technological religious performances. When I conducted research among Revival/Zion churches in Jamaica, I encountered two theological grammars at work. One embraced aspects of orthodox Christian theology (biblical revelation, the Trinity, sin, redemption, Christology, and eschatology) and cognate theological symbols and ideas that were often expressed through confessional statements and preaching. The other was folded into a system of “practical beliefs”<sup>2</sup> and corresponding ritual processes, including a religious epistemology informed by invisible sources of divine revelation, constant communication and reciprocity between the visible and invisible world domains, devotional activity involving a community of divinities (spirit messengers), individual attachment to a particular entity within the divine community, divination and spiritual readings, holistic approaches to health and healing, the sacralization of nature and all forms of creation, spiritual bathing, and ritual offerings and sacrifice.

After attending any number of worship services at Holy Mount Zion Baptist Church, a Revival/Zion congregation in Yallas, St. Thomas, I expected ministry services within the wider community, especially among those in need or crisis, to emphasize scripture reading, prayer, and singing. However standard “pastoral care and counseling” practices included divination readings, spiritual bathing, revelatory experience guided by a divine community much larger than the Christian Trinity, the use of spiritually charged and empowered religious objects, esoteric interpretations of scripture, and animal sacrifice/food offerings to earthbound and air-bound spirits. The traditional theological training I received had prepared me to assume that the performance of Christianity, most evident in Sunday morning worship services at Holy Mount Zion, should constitute the starting point for an elaboration of Revival/Zion theological ideas. Additionally, the conceptual frameworks at my disposal for constructing theological categories presumed a post-Enlightenment Western Christian

as well as the academic theologian. I have also gleaned crucial insights about the limits of interpretive and translational work from being studied, not just by the informants I encounter in the field, but also by participating in focus groups and agreeing to be interviewed by other ethnographers for their research projects.

**2** Kola Abimbola, *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account* (Birmingham, UK: IAP Publishers, 2006).



cosmology and temporal orientation that contained no translational resources for apprehending the characteristic theological bilingualism<sup>3</sup> at the center of Jamaican Revival/Zionist faith and practice. Indeed ethnographic rather than theological instincts directed my attention to the full range of Revival/Zion religious practices beyond church walls. The lessons learned from my discovery of bilingualism as a core feature of the Revival/Zion tradition's collective theological imagination have transformed my approach to theologies and religious practices of the African diaspora.

I am still committed to contextual theology with its emphasis upon liberationist and postcolonialist hermeneutics. However, the longer I remain at the crossroads of theology and ethnography in this field of research, the more convinced I am that hidden and profound theological resources of many Black religious communities can be best accessed through attention to repertoires of religious performances. Although such performances can include writing, they often do not. Thus the theoretical tools and methods of ethnography have certainly helped me and other theological scholars dealing with similar research concerns to overcome the constraints of theology. Whether our approaches and resultant scholarship amount to an expansion of theological method and discourse or the beginnings of an alternative *theographic* tradition in religious studies is yet to be decided.

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**3** This term is inspired by Tracey Hucks's concept of "ritual bilingualism." See especially p. 28 of her article, "I smoothed the Way, I Opened Doors: Women in the Yoruba-Orisha Tradition of Trinidad," in *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora*, ed. Ruth Marie Griffith and Barbara Savage (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 19-36.

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***Does Anthropology Need to “Get Religion”? Critical Notes on An Unrequited Love***

*Don Seeman, Emory University*

Does anthropology need to “get religion”? It is clear that practitioners of the academic study of religion and even theology have long been coming to terms—many of them—with the need to incorporate ethnographic methods of research and analysis into their quiver of basic interdisciplinary competencies. The presence of anthropologists like myself in leading departments of religion and the dedication of this issue of *Practical Matters* to the question of “Ethnography and Theology” both testify that this union is, if not yet exactly to be taken for granted, at least no longer any cause for wonder or alarm. Ethnography is simply larger today than the discipline that gave birth to it; and though textual and historical disciplines still dominate the fields of religion and theology, ethnography is inextricably part of the mix. My own experience is that it has even achieved a certain exaggerated mystique among students, as if simply embracing an ethnographic gestalt could solve all their quandaries about authorial reflexivity, ethical contexts of research, and subaltern research subjects. This cachet of ethnography within religion and theology does not, however, typically extend to the reciprocal appreciation of religion and theology within the world of professional anthropology. In this short essay I want to argue that anthropology actually does need to “get religion”—and suggest what it may gain by doing so.

Anthropologists have frequently been uncertain of what to do about religion. This has not prevented us from writing about it. But it has conditioned us to seek certain kinds of potentially reductive explanations in which religion is essentially swallowed up by social structural concerns, “collective effervescence,” or symbolic articulations of culture in the “interpretive anthropology” mode. This has not been helped by the fact that even professional religion scholars find it difficult to articulate more than a “family resemblance” between phenomena as diverse as Irish Catholic catechism, Sinhalese Buddhist meditative practice, and religious violence as well as peacemaking in many parts of the world. Clifford Geertz can be congratulated for at least trying, in his famous essay on “Religion as a Cultural System,” to achieve a working definition of religion from an anthropological point of view.<sup>1</sup> Yet I sometimes ask students to read that essay while systematically replacing the word “religion” everywhere it appears with the word “culture,” to show how little the meaning of that essay changes when religion actually drops out. Anthropology has done the study of religion a service by insisting on a holistic frame that relates religion to economics, social structure, and cultural meaning-making, yet one often senses that religion as a distinctive topic of inquiry has been lost in the process. I want to suggest three rationales for why anthropology ought to engage theology and the academic study of religion more strongly.

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<sup>1</sup>Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 87-125.

## A. BECAUSE INTELLECTUAL HONESTY AND ANALYSIS REQUIRE IT.

Despite contemporary disciplinary and ideological boundaries, it needs to be said that anthropology and religion/theology have never been as far removed from one another as each field has at times imagined. Anthropology has worked hard to distance itself from its historic enmeshment with missionary practice and sources of knowledge, but this estrangement has been complicated in interesting ways by the more recent convergences between activist anthropology and contemporary liberation theology (think of work by icons like Paul Farmer and Nancy Scheper-Hughes).<sup>2</sup> Anthropology's historical rebuff of all culturally *prescriptive* projects through its methodology-*cum*-ideology of cultural relativism has also proven difficult to sustain in pure form given the political and ethical universe of globalization, migration, hybridization, and contested liberatory projects we inhabit. While anthropology has wholeheartedly endorsed academic projects with strong prescriptive dimensions through feminist and post-colonial scholarship, for example, academic theology has grown far more receptive over time to the significance of non-elite and non-Western religious forms, to the centrality of vernacular practice as a topic worthy of serious research (witness this online *Practical Matters* journal), and to the need for respectful engagement across cultural and religious lines. This is a fascinating moment to examine possibilities for interdisciplinary scholarship, and also to acknowledge the intellectual history of our field.

Consider, for example, the whole hermeneutic move in cultural anthropology, which cannot really be understood without attention to trends in Protestant biblical interpretation that continue to fascinate major hermeneutics scholars like Paul Ricoeur. Talal Asad has forcefully shown, in his *Genealogies of Religion*, how post-Reformation assumptions about the essentially *symbolic* value of ritual practice has shaped the whole direction of contemporary anthropology, essentially blinding it to non-discursive dimensions of ritual practice.<sup>3</sup> But this is actually a subtle business, with even more far reaching implications than Asad has shown. Elsewhere I have argued that Max Weber's *Verstehen*, from which the whole interpretive trend in social science derives, stems from a more or less self-conscious secularization by Weber of the Protestant emphasis on coherent, articulate meaning as the touchstone of authentic religious practice.<sup>4</sup> Remember that in his great *Sociology of Religion*, Weber calls the attainment of symbolic coherence, "salvation," and argues that by attaining this holistic moral worldview, ritual and religious virtuosos can attain what he calls the "certainty of grace."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Paul Farmer in *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) and Nancy Scheper-Hughes in *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) both make use of framing themes drawn explicitly from liberation theology.

<sup>3</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Don Seeman, "Otherwise than Meaning: On the Generosity of Ritual," *Social Analysis* 48 (2004): 55-71.

<sup>5</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, translated by Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991 [1922]), 161.

This kind of intellectual-historical project is important because it opens up lost possibilities for the development of paradigms in social science. If Geertz, following Weber, was drawn to think about ritual primarily as an aid to theodicy (cultural meaning-making in the face of suffering), what would an anthropology look like that had grown out of a different cultural and religious milieu? I have compared Weber's disenchanted Calvinism with the disenchanted Judaism of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who treats ritual practice as being less akin to theodicy than to the "medical gesture" of responding to suffering through ethical practice, but I suspect that a Confucian- or Buddhist-inspired theoretical framework would find additional opportunities for rethinking inherited ideas. Anthropology needs to take theology seriously as part of its own intellectual formation if it wants to engage these kinds of issues honestly.

B. *BECAUSE IT IS OFTEN RELEVANT TO OUR FIELD RESEARCH.*

Anthropology has forced scholars of religion and some theologians to recognize that lived practice and lived experience cannot be reduced to what is recorded or prescribed in elite texts and discourses. Local context always matters, and sometimes it is what matters most to an adequate description of the social world. On the other hand, some local contexts can best be understood only with reference to the broad literary or trans-local textual traditions that help to define the horizons of possibility and desire. My colleague Vince Cornell has argued persuasively that failure to effectively locate Sufi saints in Morocco within broader Islamic discourses about piety and blessing has caused some anthropologists to adopt an unrealistic view of saints as little more than rural wonder-workers.<sup>6</sup> In fact, they often represented major streams of Islamic juridical and theological traditions that linked local saints across time and space to other developments in the Islamic world. It is surely no crime for individual scholars to focus their research on a particular analytic or methodological expertise (like ethnographic study or the analysis of medieval religious texts); yet it is also more than reasonable to ask whether a tradition like Islam, with a long and exceptionally vibrant textual and theological tradition, can be adequately studied without any reference to this tradition, as if the major institutions and life-ways of a village in Egypt or northern Sudan sprang into being without any reference to this wider frame. At the very least, one would expect ethnographers of societies with strong textual traditions that inform lived religion to be fully conversant with the secondary scholarly literature on the religious traditions that help to define their ethnographic research context. In fact, I think we can begin to demand more.

The combination of ethnographic and theological or history of religions research is still largely experimental, but it should be obvious that research tools developed self-consciously for the study of non-literate cultures in the early days of anthropology need some adjustment for the study of religious cultures that are heirs to strong and vibrant textual traditions, like Islam and Judaism

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<sup>6</sup> Vincent Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Authority and Power in Rural Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).

or Buddhism and Hinduism. Matthew Engelke's recent book, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church*, is a good example of what can be accomplished when the same researcher develops dual expertise in both ethnography and the intellectual history of a lived religious tradition.<sup>7</sup>

C. BECAUSE HUMAN EXPERIENCE CANNOT BE REDUCED TO A SINGLE ANALYTIC FRAME.

I would like to argue finally that religion, like art and literature, probably represents a fundamental register of human experience that deserves dedicated, non-reductionist study in its own right, and that anthropology should view itself as one of the disciplines that can best contribute to this project. Godfrey Lienhardt's 1961 classic *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* took the need to understand the lived *experience* of divinity among an African people seriously, but it had precious few successors.<sup>8</sup> In teaching my own graduate seminar on the ethnography of religious experience, I have found many works that deal seriously with the ritual practice, cultural meanings or social organization of religious systems, but surprisingly few that seek to really engage the worlds that emerge from religious perspectives in their own terms. This is not an argument for any particular form of analysis but for the insistence that religious experience deserves attention alongside other kinds of anthropological concerns. Moreover, religious experience often plays a special role in shaping the contours of the local moral worlds that anthropologists study.<sup>9</sup>

Recently, I participated in an interdisciplinary project that included the ethnographic study of a homeless shelter specializing in care for families with children. Our task was to determine whether religious practices or institutions contribute to the likelihood of unplanned pregnancy among poor women, but we found something that surprised us. While there is little evidence that religious affiliation or church membership play a strong role in reproductive decision making, we did find that a diffuse set of ideas about the nature of "blessing" and divine agency in reproduction contributed to a broad resistance toward planning discourse among women we interviewed. This was not based on any clear doctrinal rejection of either abortion or contraception, but on a vernacular concern with the appropriate limits of instrumental decision making and control.<sup>10</sup>

While this analysis must stand or fall on the basis of the ethnographic data we have generated, it is unlikely that we would have been sufficiently sensitive to this theme in our interviews were it not for previous, anthropologically inflected textual research on the gendered poetics of blessing

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Eric Engelke, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Godfrey Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).

<sup>9</sup> For more on the concept of local moral worlds as I employ it, see Arthur Kleinman, *Writing at the Margin: Discourse between Anthropology and Medicine* (University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Don Seeman, Iman Roushdy-Hammady, Annie Hardison-Moody, Laurie M. Gaydos, Winnifred Thompson, and Carol G. Hogue, "Choosing Unintended Pregnancy: Women's Agency, Religion, and the Discourse of Public Health," under submission.

in biblical texts.<sup>11</sup> In a modest way, I believe that attentiveness to theological and religious textual sources has made me into a better ethnographer, just as anthropology has made me a better scholar of religion. Studies in theology and comparative religion each have the capacity to attune us as scholars to transcendent dimensions of being human, and to forms of agency and constraint that are scarcely registered in more positivistic social science frames.

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**11** Don Seeman, "Where is Sarah Your Wife? Cultural Poetics of Gender and Nationhood in the Hebrew Bible," *Harvard Theological Review* 91(1998): 103-126.