

**Roundtable on *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*:
Ethnography: A Gift to Theology and Ethics**

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I have already indicated in the forward what a huge fan I am of this book. By not only defending the theological and ethical ways in which ethnography can be deployed, but also providing compelling examples of this kind of research, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* is a must-read for anyone interested in the lived faith of Christian communities. It is not hard to connect the crucial role of ethnography with classic versions of “theology.” *Theologia* is not simply creedal, or about orthodox beliefs; it has always, to some extent, entailed the alteration of human life in its fullness. For centuries faith has been a *paideia*, a “knowledge of God” that entailed formation of a person’s soul. Theology has always been practical in some sense.¹ Edward Farley makes a great case that *theologia* is reflective, formative, lived knowledge of God.² And, common-sense-wise, if it is lived knowledge, we must recognize the thick, dense, and very different realities that constitute “lived.” To begin to explore such realities, briefly I will name some of the wonderful shifts in defining “theology” that are emerging from this work, some challenges to traditional categories (like “systematics”) that result, and related ongoing issues that are not explicitly addressed in the volume.

A crucial implication of this work is not only the fleshing out of lived faith, but the *challenge to producers of “official” theology and some of its classic forms*. Theological traditions regarding the

finite, fallible character of our lives should *require* us to treat “academic theology” itself as a finite, fallible, and, therefore, socially located, biased set of lenses. While much of dominant academic theology does not name this, unacknowledged assumptions about what “lived” is are always at work in “theology,” somehow reflective of a highly cognitive-focused, body-mind split. My point? When these assumptions are not identified, which is illustrated in “theology” without an adjective, it *does not mean* that such assumptions are not operative. For example, theology without an adjective typically assumes that the white male is the normal human being. The lenses that shape such a worldview are operative; they are simply not acknowledged.

One of the biggest gifts of the shift to ethnography is that the millions of human beings who are excluded when theology remains “academic” can potentially be construed as faithful believers with unique wisdoms—wisdoms which we academics need to honor and learn from, but which are frequently off our screens. Taking them seriously can help surface the hidden assumptions and limiting categories of classic “theology/ethics.”

Let me offer an example: Listening to non-academics challenge academic theologians to expand images for coherence, which is primarily what “systematics” is about. As John Macquarrie puts it, systematics is defined as an academic discipline that “seeks to express the content of religious faith as a coherent body of propositions.”³ However, I have not found believers who think systematically, which does not mean that they are necessarily confused or dumb. So a helpful word to indicate this is “logics.” Of course, logics come in other forms: aesthetic and moral images for unity, such as David Kelsey’s “mobile,” landscape, geography, or an “economy.” The implication of this broader approach is that we cannot continue to think that real theology is only the logic of systematics via the internal logic of a self-enclosed intellectual system. We need more ways to imagine the *logics* of faith and additional *genres* for the display of these logics.

The next issue is power. Emily Reimer-Barry agrees with Todd Whitmore that we must recognize the limitations of “veranda ethics,” and, of course, veranda theology, too, especially the role of power/privilege in the production of theology from the standard “academic” position. This is an invitation for academics to connect with other kinds of realities, as they argue. But it also means that we need to acknowledge academics as a social location and stop contrasting it with so-called “practical” or “lived faith.” This typical contrast implies that being “academic” is not being “practical”—that it happens nowhere and is not itself a form of “lived” faith. There are class arrangements, plus features of gender and race, etc. that are constitutive of the social location of academics, and they must be investigated as they intersect with the conditions of the production of “certifying discourse,” or what counts as legitimate and authoritative knowledge. Most academics are likely part of what Barbara and John Ehrenreich called the Professional Managerial Class.⁴ I was struck by my own class and professional location when one Sunday I got into a back-and-forth with a homeless white man sitting outside the African American church I attended in a lower income neighborhood. I was trying to be nice, but felt frustrated and had to go. As I drove away, it suddenly dawned on me that this man and I not only differ in terms of financial security, we are

constructed by and occupy different *temporalities*. That element of our social locations needs to be fleshed out. For example, I am thinking that the homeless person's temporality is defined by survival strategies, whereas mine is defined by an appointment calendar of meetings, library time, class time, sabbatical time, etc. Of course, it is obvious that we live in different worlds. However, my point is that the constructed, artificial worlds of the academic need much more fleshing out, so that we theologians can quit talking as if our work comes from a non-biased, non-located connection with God and "THE tradition." Our temporality is not the universal (as it feels like) and the homeless man's temporality aberrant; *both* are constructed. Just as the "coherence" in a life organized around survival needs the status of "real theology"—Melissa Browning is really helpful here⁵—I want a thicker ethnography of the ivory tower. Kathryn Tanner points out, theology has a proclivity to project "onto the object studied what its own procedures of investigation requires—a coherent whole."⁶ So what I will call for as the invoking of imaginative genres to trace "logics" should not require what academic theologians think of as coherence (see following note).⁷

Other constructive contributions of ethnography as theology that the volume highlights include the new categories that ethnographic work can generate for theology. Let me mention a few of the challenges to the character of classic intellectualist theology that have emerged for me from participant observation in a community that was inter-racial and included people with disabilities. First, theology's overly cognitive and verbal form was highlighted for me. Whitmore rightly argues that theology/ethics must honor millions of human beings who are not literate. Another challenge that I found is to the limitation of theology not just to belief, but also to *language itself*. This challenge was generated when I finally recognized that persons with disabilities—those without language—were off the radar of any version of "theology" of which I knew. Yet those who work with and study such human beings have discerned their own distinct forms of communication—non-verbal and bodily. What appear to many of us as simply noise-making disruptions (a reason very few churches actually include such persons) are actually communications. For example, when the minister leads the community in prayer, many voices of persons from the group homes echo his powerful voice. These echoes are not repetitions of what he says, but rather a call for attention, an expression of consent, pleasure, or even protest. As such, this echoing, or *echolalia*, is itself a communication of social interaction.⁸ Many persons with some form of developmental and learning disability rely upon nonsymbolic communication.⁹ So read or orally delivered content is inadequate as a communicative form. In large part the mediums *are* the message, or at least they are as important as the intended message of inclusion, and the mediums must be multiple, including nonsymbolic communication, echolalia, and more!

Unresolved Challenges

Some of the more difficult challenges to academic theology by ethnographic method displayed in the book emerge from taking seriously and extending the role of those being "studied" as par-

ticipants in the production of knowledge. As commendable as collaborative work is, it would call into question my use of categories that many of the folks I “studied” would not like. The book’s introduction and many of the essays emphasize and illustrate the ethnographic recognition that has long challenged the objective, expert stance of the participant observer. Recognizing the gifts gained by openness and learning from the “other” is wonderfully expounded in the book. Not only is the participant observer redefined as participant witness, but, importantly, emphasis is given to the inevitable and crucial role of stumbling and missteps, “looking silly,” “gaffes,” for example, and *learning from* them. Honoring the dignity of those being “studied” or co-participants is clearly important, particularly when power differentials are assessed. However, the question I want to raise has to do with the constructive possibilities attending analyses that expand interpretations of situations/communities, but expand them with categories that those persons do NOT provide and may not like. This issue is important for all use of ethnography, not just the essays in this book.

I tread a difficult line here. Institutional Review Boards are designed to protect interviewees from the harm academics might do, and I wish to honor their right to self-protection. However, in an ethnographic project I did in an interracial church, interviews were central, and I discovered in layers the themes, then patterns, as Reimer-Barry articulates, but they were not adequate. Eventually I used categories to thicken out the place in a way that some of the church members would definitely not have liked. I saw a real disconnect between the language and *testimonies* about “color-blindness” from both African American and white members and the *behavior* of whites. An intentionally multi-racial church, the white minister invited a black guest preacher from Africa one Sunday, who was accompanied by a host of friends; this provoked the complaint by some white members that the church was getting “too black.” I needed a different way to frame the contradictions than simply reporting their strong beliefs about colorblindness, and eventually used sociologist Paul Connerton’s categories for defining societies—notably, the fuller complex conceptions of social memory that he argues are crucial to social identity. In his view, social memory is found not simply in texts, normative and historical (e.g., scripture and tradition), or in passed down rituals; social memory is passed on in the form of incorporative practices that entail bodily proprieties—what a society defines as “proper” and allowable for differently marked bodies (socially marked).¹⁰ These are deeply embedded, pre-reflective cultural habituations—gendered bodily proprieties are quite common. (For instance, women in different American cultures, religious and otherwise, as well as women in other countries, know what they can and cannot do with their bodies. Place them in pulpits? Leave them uncovered? Jaunt around in public alone at night?) I used the notion of racialized bodily proprieties to get at the aversion to black bodies that I assume many whites have been habituated into—“ownership of space”—especially when they are outnumbered by bodies dressed as equals (the claim that the church was getting “too black.”)

Now I never gave these folks the chance to collaborate in that interpretation. Part of this was a time thing—the church had shrunk, most whites had left, and it been folded into a historically black church by the time I wrote the book. But I seriously doubt the whites would have agreed. So

the larger question is about the function of my privilege as an academic who can present them and my serious desire to find categories that would help portray and make central the deeply embedded race, gender, and class habituations that are key to our social identity. I would like to think that concern with privilege and power and their complicated forms can be surfaced by ethnographic work—theological or otherwise—in this case, to surface issues like defining “tradition.” Connernton’s insistence that bodily practices (such as proprieties) ARE as key to social memory as our practices of inscription (written, linguistic traditions) is a crucial part of doing what Scharen and Vigen call for in carnal theology. When are divinity students going to be taught not just what Augustine, Aquinas, and the “fathers” said and wrote about (desire and faith and women), but that their “traditions” also entailed bodily proprieties equally constitutive of their lived faith, even if unacknowledged, and, thus, part of their “invisible tradition”?

In brief, I raise here two issues not simply for the book, but for theology in general: 1) I used a frame—bodily proprieties—that was not acknowledged by the participants in my study. 2) The resonance of that frame—the important lived realities that it characterizes/articulates—needs to have an impact on theology/ethics. The book-defined version of theology defines “tradition” as linguistic, written inheritances; but I want “tradition” to include bodily practices. Peter Gathje’s account of *The Open Door* is a critical take on the power dynamics for the important purpose of challenging certain versions of virtue ethics. [“The Cost of Virtue: What Power in the Open Door Community Might Speak to Virtue Ethics”] Certain questions matter here: have I crossed the line of “accountability”? If so, should every interpretation by the ethnographer require assent/collaboration?

But these questions are connected to the inevitable re-framings that come with theological/ethical employment of ethnography. Even to “interpret” what folks without language are communicating, if one had the skills of reading nonsymbolic communication, would be a reframing that could not be safely or adequately confirmed. Of course, you could require their relatives/family/staff’s “ok” for your interpretation. But the need to read more than the cognitive/verbal/linguistic communications, which includes the visual and the aural—what Manuel Vasquez calls the essentially “material” character of religion—is another indicator that ethnographic descriptions will be more than what the interviewee can identify.¹¹ The function of bodily movement, music, chanting, visual icons, etc. are essential to church practices. And persons will not always have interpretive lenses to discuss these essential elements of what is always material religion.

Finally, how is ethnography properly “theological”? A crucial theological theme is invoked by the book: the incarnational (carnal) character of Christian faith begs for study of lived, embodied practice. Ethnography can help make theology carnal, says Scharen. According to Whitmore, ethnography fleshes out loving our neighbors as ourselves. Absolutely! In addition to Christian themes that invite thick description, the book does a great job of discussing the potential for seeing the relation of so-called “descriptive” work with (to?) the constructive/normative. (In the volume, Jones sees it as “witness to revelation.”) “Tacit assumptions about the world find their way into the

theories of every academic discipline—literary criticism, physical science, history, and all the social sciences,” says ethnographer James Spradley.¹² I think such tacit assumptions entail tacit *values*. “Interpretations” or “construals” of the world are value-laden. However minimally moralistic such valuing may appear, to care about x rather than y entails some value-orientation, as in, what matters? And why? Theological “values” get really tricky, though, for secular academics such as social scientists. As you all observe, they will be worried about using interviews to say something about atonement.¹³

For example, other “secular” discourses are blatantly value-laden. Feminist theory—typically Christianity-avoidant—has value-laden commitments and appropriates theory that cannot be proven but is based upon enhancement of the value of “women” and critiques of “patriarchy” for its diminishing of certain populations. So as a form of analysis that operates out of value-orientation, notions of the good, etc., I do not see a problem with ethnography done from a theological/ethical perspective. (Cultural anthropologist James Clifford identifies ethnography as allegory in the sense that as a story about this, it is a story about that.)¹⁴

However, that doesn’t account for the God-referent in theology. By that I do not mean literally naming God. Rather, I mean the assumption that alterations toward the good in world-relations are somehow grounded in that-which-is-not-the-world (Tillich). This is a topic that needs much more attention. I do NOT agree that some Christian “values” or themes are “revealed” (i.e., not human constructions) and simply by their use we entail God. That implies an absolutizing or idolatry that ethnography itself challenges (given the inevitably altered associations that come with different contexts). As an indicator of that God-referent, one thing is clear: “orthodoxy” will not work for this shift to ethnographic study. Given the complexities of human life so meaningfully illustrated in the essays in the volume, correct beliefs cannot be the indication of the theo-centric referent or theological nature of such work. If anything is an indirect “sign,” it will be altered social relations that can be said to testify to Divine Presence.

Insofar as value-oriented interpretive frames are operative in ethics/theological ethnography, I should suggest that some version of theological anthropology may be a good way to begin to address this issue. I do operate with a kind of “essence of Christianity” conception of God’s mode of presence—which needs to be defended and criticized in another conversation—but my thinking about the connection of so-called “God-talk” with human experience pushes against the distinction just as the authors in this volume do;¹⁵ they are *inseparable*. (Edward Farley would say there is no knowledge of God, only knowledge of human/world relations that can “appresent” the transcendent. Indirect signs of God’s presence occur as altered social relations.) So I never assume that correct God-language is a sign of God’s presence, and my guess is that the authors in this volume don’t either.

Interpreting those altered relations will come from a necessary construal of explicitly “theological” or Christian themes. Incarnation, agape, the finite goodness of creation—*imago Dei*—are important categories to shape logics of ethnographic interpretation. I use the logic of creation, sin

as brokenness, and redemptive alteration—a kind of theological anthropology as my interpretive logic. However, as any ethnographer would agree, I cannot require the use of that specific language by any community for practices to qualify for that logic. I use such an explicit theo-logic only *secondarily* to make more theological what is my initial logic for attending to a situation and deciding “what matters,” what to pay attention to. That initial logic is “interpreting a situation characterized by harm that demands redress” and requires employment of all sorts of secular lenses to “read” what counts as harm and as redress, in the form of enhancement of the mutual honoring of folks in different social groups (expanded from Hannah Arendt’s category of a “place to appear”).¹⁶

What makes the interpretive logic potentially theological, rather than just a moral interpretation resonant with any secular view, is the assumption that the human telos is theocentric, and that leads to a thicker “theological” logic. The latter assumes that harms are somehow connected to idolatrous practices that generate social brokenness. Thus the diminishing of brokenness in racist and ability-dominant relations is an indirect sign of God’s redemptive presence; but my interpretation of such is a testimony (and I refer to Jones’ piece here again) that cannot be proven, and there are really complicated issues of agency involved. Furthermore, I am working with a normative account of Christian faith, which is commendable, perhaps, because it has some more malleability with regard to intellectual/discursive forms than versions that privilege correct belief/practice. And that account must be subject to alteration—I have even wondered if idolatry, which typically assumes the capacity to be self-reflective, needs more adjustment, given the *imago Dei* of persons without that capacity. However, the question of the necessity or expendability of the “theo-centric” assumption in interpretive lenses is one I think needs some continued discussion if we are going to use the category “theological.” And, of course, the question can be raised about other ways to identify the “theo-centric” assumption in an interpretive frame. But part of what is so important about this volume is, of course, the generation of more and more fascinating topics and questions for theology/ethics conversations!

(Endnotes)

1 This is the case despite the fact that practical theology has come to mean different things, i.e., lived faith of believers, a method, an academic discipline, a curricular area. See Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Practical Theology,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, ed. Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2010), 1739-1743.

2 Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1983).

3 Doctrine is sometimes different from dogma—dogma can be required belief; creeds like the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian creeds are distinguished from confessions of denominations. *Systematics* can be an academic discipline that “seeks to express the content of religious faith as a coherent body of propositions.” John Macquarrie, “Systematic Theology,” in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, ed. Donald Musser and Joseph Price (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 469. Or liberation approaches treat doctrines selectively as display of symbols, or key areas around which communities focus and articulate main issues of faith. Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor, eds., *Reconstructing Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 14f.

4 They define the PMC as “salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the social division of labor may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations.” Barbara and John Ehrenreich, “The Professional-Managerial Class,” in *Between Labor and Capital*, ed. Pat Walker (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1978), 5-45.

5 Vigen quotes Bourdieu about academic culture: and its “intellectualist bias which entices us to construe the world as spectacle, as a set of significations to be interpreted rather than as concrete problems to be solved practically.” See Pierre Bourdieu, *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 36f, quoted in Aana Marie Vigen, “Benedictions: For Those Willing to Give Ethnography a Try,” in *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, eds. Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen (New York: Continuum, 2011), 236. So how does our work, even ethnographic, make any impact?

Kathryn Tanner rightly observes that “belief and value commitments” are usually left underdeveloped and “ambiguous” in the ordinary practice of faith. Kathryn Tanner, “Theological Reflection and Christian Practices,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 230.

6 Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 76.

7 When I began an ethnographic study of an interracial church through participant observation, an academic cultural anthropologist told me that I should NOT look for that kind of coherence.

8 Long unrecognized as communication, echolalia is a form of expression sometimes used by people with autism. Ann P. Turnbull, Rud Turnbull, Marilyn Shank, and Sean J. Smith, eds., *Exceptional Lives: Special Education in Today's Schools*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2003), 2.

9 I interpret disability here through the categories of special education, because its focus is enhancing communication. According to the U.S. Department of Education, categories of disability include learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, multiple disabilities, hearing impairments, orthopedic impairments, autism, visual impairments, traumatic brain injury, developmental delay, and deaf-blindness. See Turnbull, et al., “Overview of Today's Special Education,” in *Exceptional Lives*, 2-39. My descriptions of various conditions of the group home residents, which do not include all of those categories, are based upon my own observations plus an interview with Steve Blakeman, who was a consultant to the group home. Steve Blakeman, interview by author, March 17, 2000. There are critics of the social power of the “normal” who would not agree with all of these labels.

10 Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

11 Manuel Vasquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

12 James Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winson, 1979), 10-11, quoted in Aana Marie Vigen, “To Hear and to be Accountable,” in *Disrupting White Supremacy from Within: White People on What We Need to Do*, ed. Jennifer Harvey, Karen Case, and Robin Hawley Gorsline (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2044), 230.

13 Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, 60.

14 See James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Allegory,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 98-121.

15 Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds. *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2011), xix-xx.

16 Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).