

**Roundtable on Ethnography and Religion:
Writing “the Truth”**

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Robert Orsi makes the proposal—at once extravagant and astute—that all graduate students of religion be required to enter into “a season of self-reflexive fieldwork” and that “scholars of religion continue this practice for the rest of their lives.” For the last decade or so, ignorant of Orsi’s argument, I’ve touted a parallel proposal: all doctoral programs in religion should apprentice their students for a year to creative writing workshops. I hope to break scholarly writing out of the moribund genres to which its guilds confine it, but even more I want to instill in writers a piercing humility about writing out human lives.

I feel a bit foolish saying this in Orsi’s presence. He is, after all, one of the best writers on religion we’ve got. Even in this short piece, he implies a large argument about writing, urging us “to lift these stories up from the distractions of contemporary culture by giving them as precise a rendering as we can.” I agree—I applaud. Still, this injunction’s phrasing worries me. It can sound as if there are stories out there that have only to be lifted up, only recorded. I notice that Orsi has insisted just before that “the truth is not there waiting to be told. . . . It has to be found, or recovered, its context elaborated, and interpreted.” But there, too, he adds that a “hard core of experience . . . must be faithfully acknowledged.” As if the writer’s chief virtue were fidelity. As if the stories to

be acknowledged were hard-edged things rather than stuttering efforts to give some voice to pain through rage and inhibition, despite the muzzles of horror and propriety. I don't think that Orsi means the injunction to have these implications, but I notice how many of us around this (virtual) table worry that it does reduce writing to some 'realism'.

I am not an ethnographer, and I have too much admiration for the ethnographers I know to masquerade under their title. But I have spent some seasons of "fieldwork" (I never called it that) among the "religious practitioners" at a queer church in San Francisco. The congregation is one of the oldest of the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC), founded in 1968 by Troy Perry in a Los Angeles living room. From the beginning, Troy's church ministered to many LGBT Christians, though never only to them. MCC—San Francisco was a pioneer in presenting non-heterosexual versions of Christianity, while it reminded secular activists of the importance of religion in many queer lives. Clergy at the church performed same-sex marriages long before the cause became politically popular. During the first wave of American AIDS deaths, the congregation hosted uncountable funerals, even as it tried to comfort the sick and dying. So I have visited this congregation over many years to reflect on sexuality and religion, but also to pray, to learn, and to mourn. I don't go as a participant-observer; I go as myself.

One year, I was given permission to conduct life history interviews with some congregants and their friends. I asked them to recount their religious education alongside their sexual awakening and then to wonder about what held the stories together, if anything did. I suppose that I made all the mistakes of a beginning interviewer, but even so, I was offered heartrending accounts. Most of my conversation partners wept at one point or another. Most remarked that they had never been asked to tell about growing up religious while growing up queer. There were happy discoveries and new shocks.

During these conversations, I held some questions in reserve. I was taking down the life histories in connection with a book on the religious rhetoric of American debates about homosexuality. So I attended especially not to what was individual and fresh, but to the common and the familiar. To paraphrase Don Seeman, I intended to re-tell the stories in ways that the tellers wouldn't choose and might, in fact, deny. My conversation partners followed scripts that had been composed decades earlier for other purposes (usually polemical). Sometimes they would mark their quotations or adaptations ("Our pastor preached ...," "My friend hugged me and whispered ...," "It's like when people say ..."). Mostly my interlocutors took the prescribed words and the implied identities as their own. Often they followed the established scripts most closely in the grip of strong emotion.

I would like to believe that the words we use to tell our inmost truths are most of all our own words, but I know better. The language of romantic love is notoriously clichéd, which is why pop ballads can circulate through so many kinds of bodies—across borders of gender, desire, race, nation, wealth. Again, a declaration of queer sexual identity, the speech-act of "coming out," is at once achingly intimate and (sub-) culturally dictated. (Courtney Bender describes the "web of

story," and Joyce Flueckiger discusses a "shared narrative repertoire.") So I wasn't surprised by the simultaneity of emotion and cliché in my interviews. Nor did I think that the reliance on cliché meant that the emotion was faked or hollow. But still I was stymied in my efforts to write respectfully about the interviews.

How could I represent the vivid voices of my conversation partners while cataloguing the repetition of rhetorical devices in what they said? I couldn't bring myself to excerpt the interviews as illustrations of topical headings. Each interview felt to me like an integral performance. So I played with putting two or three columns on the page: the unedited text of the interview to the left, notes on its rhetorical 'sources' down the middle, to the right comments on unusual variations or combinations of motifs. But there was no way to read the multiple columns coherently. I next tried to assemble the book by alternating expository chapters with barely edited interviews, but the simultaneity of references in any one interview interrupted whatever historical story I hoped to tell about the circulation of rhetoric. Finally, I wondered whether I could, like a long-form journalist, make my points by telling a sequence of stories about individuals. Here I ran up against the first lesson learned even by hack novelists: it is very hard to write a single scene of human life without falling into *narrative* clichés. The same cultural-linguistic forces that handed scripts to my conversation partners handed me scripts with which to explain their lives ever so tidily. If the intimacy in the conversations had something to do with the play of emotion and cliché, of hidden self and social stigma, 'realism' in a written narrative was something else again. What makes a narrated scene seem 'realistic' is not so much fidelity to an embodied event, as it is limited variation on local rules for plausibility.

Here again I feel foolish: I am hardly reporting a discovery. I am only repeating what so much of the last century's literature and literary theory makes plain. Narratives are artifacts constructed according to conventions. That insight applies to novels and to news reports, but also to the large and small stories we tell every day about ourselves. (Flueckiger mentions "the ethnographer's impulse for narrative coherency." The impulse arises in ethnographers because it arises in all speakers.) Efforts to move narratives closer to the actual flow of human experience—like the projects of the modernist novel or *cinéma vérité*—not only strain our sense of proper form, they strain our credulity. More accurate, they become less 'realistic.'

Problems of representation are by now cultural clichés. Yet so many academic writers seem to ignore them—to skip or skirt the formal challenges of narration. They are often encouraged or required to do so by the positivist models of writing that are taught—or contentedly assumed—in some doctoral programs. But it is irresponsible to construct academic narratives on the assumption that they are somehow exempt from the limits and dangers in ordinary speech—or ordinary storytelling. If we academics write stories in order to lift them up, to make them more compelling, then we are obliged to be more than ordinarily attentive to the responsibilities of storytelling. We are also obliged, as Bender suggests, to seek help with writing narratives wherever we can find it.

I no longer understand, if I ever did, how the *formal* challenge of narration in the modern novel

can be cleanly separated from the *formal* challenge of ethnographic writing. At the very least, the same compositional humility would seem to be required of both novelists and ethnographers. In an essay that fame has made a cliché, Virginia Woolf sets out to criticize certain of her contemporaries for writing fluent novels without any life in them. Having poked rather sharp fun at some of their conventions, she writes, "Life is not a series of gig lamps [or carriage lights] symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."¹ In Woolf's own case, the imperative to write that kind of life led to the breath-taking formal experiments of *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and (incomparably) *The Waves*. But before Woolf criticizes novelistic convention, or exhorts her readers to follow life, she writes, "We do not come to write better [than our great predecessors]; all that we can be said to do is to keep moving, now a little in this direction, now in that, but with a circular tendency."² Humility in giving form to the truths of human histories is a great virtue for novelists, but not only for them.

The challenge of narration is not a discovery of modernist aesthetics. As Flueckiger writes, "the creative, fluid, and even fragmented space of narrative" has been known to most experienced storytellers. You can experience it for yourself with a simple experiment: keep a journal for a month in which you try to give a truthful account of what is really happening in your life. Or start a candid memoir meant only for your own eyes. Urged by her sister to write down some autobiographical notes before she gets too old, Virginia Woolf frets first over the memoir form. After telling some of her earliest memories, she pauses again:

Though I have done my best to explain why I was ashamed of looking at my own face I have only been able to discover some possible reasons; there may be others; I do not suppose that I have got at the truth; yet this is a simple incident; and it happened to me personally; and I have no motive for lying about it. In spite of all this, people write what they call 'lives' of other people; that is, they collect a number of events, and leave the person to whom it happened unknown.³

Human lives elude the stories told about them. This is emphasized by our literary theory and felt in our daily lives, especially in those seasons when we are trying to hold together a self out of "sources" that are inevitably "hybrid and fragmentary" (Anna Gade). The limits of stories are also taught by many of the religious traditions we study. If Orsi is right to remind us that our ethnography of religious practice cannot exclude theology (and he surely is), I would add that it must also negotiate the theological lessons of contradiction, repetition, unsaying, and silence. (The pinnacle of the Christian scriptures is a life told four times and never completely.) What Shlomo Fischer says of a "liminal anti-structure which provides a real experience of the holy" applies not only to rituals, but also to the writing of religious lives—that is, of lives.

Should we give up writing then? We should indeed ask that question, as Flueckiger does. We should ask it seriously and at regular intervals, because the answer may well change. To date my most frequent answer has been: I should keep trying to write the appearances of divinity in human lives—because it feels as much like a vocation as anything I've got, because it responds to an im-

perative I must count as ethical. The writers around this table mention a number of ethical obligations and risks in ethnography. The ethnographer, they say, must not betray or imperil. She must preserve the memories entrusted to her, especially when she is one of the few capable of preserving them. He must be willing to champion the condemned and the unpopular—as James Bielo says, “to write against the grain of revilement, disdain, and easy satire.” There is another imperative, one of the most important: we must write without making stories violently simple or demonically final.

I don’t mean to elide the violence done to bodies with the violence of words. I also refuse to separate them. Agents of religious institutions often approve violence by invoking sacred stories. Priests favor some plots with blessings. We resist such violence by refusing to amplify its exhortations, but even more by reminding readers page after page that simple stories can be dangerous stories—especially when they seem most real.

(Endnotes)

1 Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction” (originally entitled “Modern Novels”), in *The Virginia Woolf Reader*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 283-291, at 287-88.

2 Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” 284.

3 Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past,” in *The Virginia Woolf Reader*, ed. Leaska, 3-40, at 10.