

Reflexive Theology: A Preliminary Proposal

Natalie Wigg-Stevenson

Emmanuel College, University of Toronto

Abstract

The ethnographic theologian's subject position in relation to the Christian communities she studies is fundamentally different from that of an anthropologist or sociologist in relation to his fields of study. Therefore, social science understandings of reflexivity cannot simply be imported and uncritically deployed in theological projects. This preliminary proposal, outlining and defining a method I call Reflexive Theology, rises out of this discrepancy between disciplinary subject positions. It re-interrogates the concept of reflexivity theologically through the context of my own fieldwork in the church where I was ordained. Through reflexive theological engagement with the multiple roles I played within my field of study, I demonstrate how Reflexive Theology draws on both everyday and academic theological discourses in ways that both produce fresh theological insights and open new possibilities for Christian living.

Theologians of culture have demonstrated increased interest in the relationship between the theologian and her field of study—the type of self-critical analysis anthropological and sociological ethnographers typically refer to as *reflexivity*.¹ The nature of academic theology—a discourse conjoined with the everyday Christian social practices that give rise to it—differs from the nature of sociological discourse, however, which does not have the same kind of organic connection to its field of study. As a result, the ethnographic theologian’s subject position in relation to the Christian communities she studies is fundamentally different from that of an anthropologist or sociologist in relation to his fields of study. This proposal, outlining a method I call Reflexive Theology, rises out of that discrepancy between disciplinary subject positions and, in exploring the unique character of theological reflexivity, unearths the particular goods available to its practitioner.

Reflexivity in Ethnographic Theology

A handful of recent texts that address the growing relationship between ethnography and Christian theology help situate this task, as they summarize how theologians have thus far framed the topic of reflexivity. First and quite simply, when ethnographic projects are not fully reflexive, argue Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, “the quality and depth of the research suffers.”² I need to pay attention to my “self as a gendered, positioned and traditioned subject,” as Pete Ward puts it, because this self shapes not only my interpretations of what is happening in my field of study, but even what is visible to me as the field itself.³ Therefore, if I am not reflexive about my self in relation to the field, my descriptive analysis of it will be shaped unconsciously and thus distorted by my own biases. Ward connects the ethnographic value of reflexivity with that of reflection and, in so doing, also emphasizes the methodological fluidity required for qualitative research to be successful. Reflexivity and reflection enable an ongoing revision of research methods in the midst of the inquiry as the researcher’s awareness of her relationship to her site grows.⁴

Second, and perhaps even more importantly, Scharen, Vigen and Ward all affirm that reflexivity helps us be ethically accountable to our research sites.⁵ If I do not understand the impact my presence has on what happens in the field, I run the risk of causing harm not only to my research partners’ reputations, but to their lives as well.⁶ With this line of thinking, Ward connects ethnographic values of reflexivity to the value of representation. Reflexivity helps prevent harm, in his view, by enabling a “continual critical examination of the way that communities and individuals are represented in and through the research process.”⁷

Mary McClintock Fulkerson offers a compelling example of these concerns as she narrates with poignant vulnerability a dawning realization of her bodily habituations related to race and ability in the midst of her fieldwork. Describing herself as a “feminist, race-conscious, progressive wannabe,” Fulkerson recalls embarking enthusiastically into her ethnographic field, a multiracial congregation comprised of people with diverse physical and intellectual dis/abilities.⁸ This enthu-

siasm quickly gives way to insecurity, however. As she tries “to hide any signs that [she is] not used to worshipping with more than a few token black people,” Fulkerson notes that “the over-ear sound of my voice tells me I am probably failing.”⁹ Her discomfort continues as she struggles to interact with a man in a wheelchair, unable to discern which is more “patronizing,” to “tower over” him or to “bend down to be face level with him.”¹⁰ Demonstrating her attempts at accurate and ethical data collection, these reflexive moments also facilitate Fulkerson’s methodological shifts away from interpreting beliefs towards analyzing practices, helping to structure her theology of redemption at the site of a wound.

Disciplinary Field Positions

Fulkerson’s methodologically and theologically productive dilemma sets the stage for why questions about reflexivity need to be re-interrogated by ethnographic theologians in our own fieldwork locations. Alternately put, it sets the stage for why we need Reflexive Theology. In this section I demonstrate that the difference in the subject locations of the ethnographic theologian and social science ethnographer resides in the fact that the academic fields of theology and anthropology/sociology are, respectively, disciplines that do and do not arise organically from the social practices that they study. Sociological reflexivity can help ethnographic theologians negotiate their habituations of social difference from their site—like those associated with racialization and disability that we see in Fulkerson’s narrative. But what do we do about the theological difference we might experience?¹¹ What do we do with habituations that are divergent from, but also nevertheless grounded in, the field of study precisely because that field is always already shaped by and shaping the modes of inquiry we use to analyze it?

Consider, for example, the intellectual trajectories that gave rise to Clifford Geertz’s symbolic anthropological methods. These trajectories are not shaped by the same historical and cultural practices that shaped the Balinese cockfights he so famously studied.¹² Likewise, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s ethnographic inquiries draw on a combination of Marxist, Structuralist, Existentialist and other intellectual trajectories, as well as a critique of the anthropological methods typified in Geertz’s work—in other words, intellectual and methodological trajectories with no immediate, organic connection to the Kabyle practices he analyzes in his seminal work.¹³ Even Loïc Wacquant (whose work I engage below), who apprenticed into an intensely physical practice (boxing) in order to do sociology *from* his body, does so to write a text that is shaped by and which extends sociological—not pugilistic—knowledge.¹⁴ In each case, therefore, the discourses that shape and guide the inquiry—i.e., those to which the inquiry contributes—are not the same discourses that shape the field of study itself.

These examples thus point to how the practices studied and the practices of study are constituted by and constitute distinct spheres of activity for sociology. This break in social continuity, Bourdieu argues, creates an epistemological break as well.¹⁵ Therefore, questions of reflexivity

in sociology must account for the difference between the researcher's academic *habitus* and the *habitus* structured by and structuring his field of study.¹⁶ In other words, it must account for that lack of organic connection by intellectually reconstructing the bodily wisdom of the field that the ethnographer lacks.

The ethnographic theologian, conversely, is differently located in her field precisely because academic theology and the Christian social practices it studies are more organically connected, as Kathryn Tanner convincingly argues. Academic theology is a "part of Christian culture," as it seeks to historicize and systematize the more ad hoc, context-specific everyday theologies by which everyday Christians reason their faith.¹⁷ Whereas everyday theologies tend to lack the broad, historical perspective required for transcending their contingency, particularly in moments of crisis, academic theologies tend to lack the concrete specificity that makes theology worth doing. Each needs the other, therefore, if both are to work together to face not only the challenges that erupt in Christian life, but to pursue new possibilities for flourishing therein as well.¹⁸

Consequently, argues Tanner, "Specialized theological investigation should be placed on a continuum with theological activity elsewhere, as something that rises in an 'organic' way out of Christian practice."¹⁹ She criticizes theologies that imagine they can "dig underneath the messy surface of Christian practice" to unearth "some underlying body of rules or patterned order to which the theology of practice conforms despite its messiness."²⁰ Theologians positioning themselves as second-order reflectors, external to the supposedly first-order practices, in fact impose a logic that "validates the conclusions of the theologian while disqualifying the people and practices it studies from posing a challenge to those conclusions."²¹

For Tanner, academic theologians—whether or not they engage ethnographic methods in their research—cannot understand their subject position as being external to the practices they engage. Instead, we must recognize that we are implicated in them. Like any everyday or ecclesial practice, academic theology always bears the potential that it is—or, at least, could become—one among many Christian social practices, albeit one shaped also by a distinct set of academic social practices, too. And so while the anthropologist or sociologist lacks the *habitus* structured by and structuring their field of study, the theologian already embodies, to varying degrees at least, aspects of the wisdom that her field of study bears. This means that whereas the sociologist's particular methods of inquiry are always constituted by a definitive break from the practices she studies, the theologian's are not. In other words, the discourses that shape and guide academic theological inquiry, and to which that inquiry contributes are—to varying degrees—the same discourses that shape the field itself.²² The academic theologian writes a text that is not just about, but actually is, a theological practice. Questions of reflexivity must, therefore, be asked differently in theological contexts.

First Baptist Church, Nashville

In 2010, I conducted a year-long ethnographic study at First Baptist Church, Nashville (FBC),

where I was an active member from 2006-2011.²³ I had also spent a year in a discernment process with the congregation, which culminated in my ordination by them in May 2009. I thus carried out my theological fieldwork in a community where I held positions of membership and leadership before, during, and following my study's duration. This membership provided fertile ground for considerations of reflexivity.

Of course, "Membership in a category or collective," as reflexive sociologist Loïc Wacquant notes, "does not by itself make one a good anthropologist of it."²⁴ Indeed, belonging to FBC had the potential to cloud my understanding of the community as much as, if not more than, illumine it. Therefore, my membership, at best, made me a good informant, not a good ethnographer.²⁵ One's social ties to a field of study cannot warrant inquiry into it; only "the *theoretical problematic* that animates the inquiry" can do that, as Wacquant argues for ethnographic sociology.²⁶ In ethnographic theological contexts, I began to realize, the theoretical problematic can be intimately linked to the theological problematic, and both are crucial for constructing the modes of inquiry.

On the one hand, the theoretical problematic animating my inquiry related to questions of reflexivity that were grounded in, but which also transcended, its imbrication with the values of reflection and representation mentioned in relation to Ward's analysis outlined above. I wanted, like Wacquant, to "take full epistemic advantage of the visceral nature of social life," not to do theology "of the body (as intelligible social product)," to borrow Wacquant's phrasing regarding his sociology, "but *from* the body (as intelligent social spring and vector of [theological] knowledge)."²⁷ Rather than mine knowledge out of the site, I sought to produce—or, better, co-produce—knowledge from my embodied location within it. Belonging to the field of study did not authorize my project, but reflexive analysis of that belonging could give rise to the methods I used for it. In what specific ways could the social roles I played within the site reshape modes of inquiry like participant observation and group interviews, I wondered? And how does the nature of theology, in its disciplinary distinction from sociology, impact my particular habituation in those social roles?

On the other hand, my inquiry's theological problematic was related to this final theoretical question. I wanted a way to bring together everyday and academic modes of theological discourse into a conversation to produce fresh theological insights and new possibilities for Christian living. In other words, I sought a constructive theological method that could make visible the communal conversation out of which that theology arose. In terms of theology's practicality, I was more interested in the particular communal theological practices that give rise to theological constructions than any abstracted application of them. Alongside asking how my social roles might produce knowledge within the site, then, this theological problematic emphasized the co-production of that knowledge; whatever theologies we created had to be created together.

My theoretical and theological interests co-inherited in a method grounded in a practice of mutual teaching and learning. Blending my roles as scholar and minister, I focused my ethnographic activity within the Sunday night adult-education theology classes that I was already teaching at FBC, reconfiguring them so that they could meet the needs of both my research partners and my

research project. In this way, I studied myself also as I studied them; more accurately put, my field of study comprised what it was that we created together.

A study that makes the self so central to its theory, method and practice makes reflexivity not only an ethnographic value or tool, but also topic. While I had engaged ethnographic ethics, sociological reflexivity and the use of reflexivity in ethnographic theology before I entered the field and had received IRB approval, I found myself floundering at times over how to conduct myself in difficult conversations. I cannot discount the possibility that this occurred because I was not as prepared as I imagined myself to be—or perhaps because I can be somewhat socially awkward. Even so, the case study I present here reveals some questions that arose for me around reflexivity in the midst of theological fieldwork, and I hope that naming them proves helpful for other theologians using ethnographic methods as well.

Reflexive Theology as Christian Practice

As outlined above, this project’s theoretical and theological problematics converge where a reflexive theological practice can nurture the organic connection between everyday and academic theologies. Here, everyday and academic theologies are not viewed as distinct spheres—as the by now proverbial language that articulates the need for theological texts to “bridge church and academy” so often implies. They are, rather, different forms of discourse that might converge in one socially positioned body: the academic theologian’s or, more specifically, mine. They can also be viewed in a more practical sense as words different speakers actually speak to each other, as happened in the classes I taught at FBC.²⁸

Throughout all of these classroom conversations, my focus was not strictly on listening to beliefs or observing practices, although I did both of these qualitative research activities. Instead, I tried to structure and guide theological conversation at the place where belief and practice integrate with each other. In essence, I tried to use ethnographic theory and methods to accomplish the goals of theological revision and reform to which Tanner calls academic theologians. I simply tried to do so in the midst of the theological practice itself (rather than, say, through the production of a text, the insights of which I could hope—but certainly not assure—would make their way back to the community). My work, therefore, was not disinterested. As a member and minister of FBC, I had certain hopes and desires for our shared theological reflection and an understanding of how to communicate them. Rather than facilitate a distancing move toward objectivity, reflexivity negotiated my deeper investment in the site. It helped me discern the community’s gifts, limitations and potential for growth and change, as well as my personal and vocational relationship to that potential.

As much as reflexivity enabled (or, at times, failed to enable) the goods of accuracy and ethical behavior in data collection, it did so not only for the purposes of precise and fair representation of the practices and people involved in the study, but also so that I could avoid unconsciously impos-

ing an agenda on the community that was foreign to it. My academic theological knowledge—by its nature, already shaped by similar trajectories that shaped my field of study, but also somewhat foreign to it—could help me nurture potential for growth and change already brewing within the community. I could tease out implications of the more ad hoc, intuitive statements spoken by my conversation partners, draw systematic connections between them and historicize them in ways that opened them to further reflection. And this reflection, I hoped, could help us re-imagine some of our shared practices. At the same time, my conversation partners’ everyday reasoning and storytelling grounded my flights toward abstraction in ways that not only shaped my Christian living, but also enriched my understanding of the theological ideas as well.²⁹ Rather than reflecting *on* Christian community or *on* Christian practice, then, my burgeoning method of Reflexive Theology helped highlight the aspects of doing theological reflection *in* Christian community and *as* Christian practice.

In the case study below, reflexivity is required to negotiate the complex roles I play simultaneously in the site—researcher, minister and friend. While sociological ethnography’s definitive break between the research *habitus* and field *habitus* would invite a strategic prioritization of the research role in this study, this story reveals, however, the ways in which ethnographic theology—or Reflexive Theology—needs to think differently if it is to act ethically, think constructively and open up new possibilities for Christian living.

Jesus Christ Is the *Only* Way to Salvation?

Our beliefs about salvation were some among those on which I wanted to reflect together. I was concerned that our traditional Baptist soteriology, which entailed intellectual assent to and confession of “Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior,” resulted in practices of evangelism that were not only aggressive and exclusionary, but which also undermined the importance of discipleship. On some level, I hoped to open the relationship between our soteriological thinking and evangelism practices in ways that might bolster our social justice programs—with hindsight, a fairly lofty goal!

While conducting my post-course interviews with members from one of the classes, I ended up one evening at Joe and Maureen’s house for an interview with some questions prepared on this topic. As we see in this story, opening up one’s theology of salvation can produce existential fear and anxiety. As the scholar-minister-friend facilitating that opening for Maureen, in particular, my responsibility to her went beyond what my research role could manage.

Joe and Maureen are an energetic, middle-aged couple, both of whom work in high school education. They speak jointly, bouncing off, interrupting and talking over one another, without rudeness and with common consent, as two people finding ideas together in sync. Each spouse’s capacity to articulate the other’s thought, at times better than the speaker, demonstrates their deep knowledge of each other. I enjoy spending time with them, and I found myself looking forward to their interview like I would look forward to an evening dedicated to getting to know some new

friends a little better.

Maureen and Joe seem relaxed as we talk over a light supper in their eat-in kitchen. They are explaining how they think they view the Trinity differently than other members of our class and church, and perhaps even Christians in general. We are winding down our musings over Joe's statement that he thinks he is "more of a polytheist" when it comes to understanding God as three and one. In the moment, I am surprised by—and work to resist—my desire to "correct" his doctrine, especially given that my intellectual interests had recently swayed towards theologies of multiplicity.³⁰ But the opening into apparent heresies provides a segue into my interest in soteriology.

"So, are you guys flexible on other doctrines, too—like salvation?" I ask. "Do you have to believe in Jesus Christ to be saved?" "No, I'm not flexible on that," answers Joe immediately, putting down his sandwich and shaking his head seriously. Maureen echoes him simultaneously, "No, no I'm not flexible on that—I believe you have to believe in Jesus Christ and that he died for our sins to be saved." The relaxed friendliness of our conversation halts for a moment, and the room feels to me just a little bit tense. Have I offended them with the question? Is there something more going on in their answers than it seems? The heavy mood cautions me against framing an immediate follow-up question, so I back off a little with non-threatening inquiries about the cookies Maureen has baked and how long they have lived in their home. I make a mental note to return to the topic later when one of them offers me an alternate route into it.

When that route appears, I realize that Maureen's adamant insistence, in particular, does not come from conviction, but rather from doubt. Much later in the conversation I ask them to reflect on what "non-church" or "non-religious" sources also shape how they think about God, and Maureen answers:

Well, I think literature, literature affects the way I think ... I read books where I learn something. They may be fictionalized accounts, but I learn something ... and I see all these cultures and what they believe and you know, sometimes it does give me pause, you know—is this the only way?

Joe jumps in: "Yeah, how could so many people be created to live a life where they don't know?" as Maureen continues:

They don't know Jesus and does that mean they're condemned? And you know, they just feel so right in their own faith, the way they were raised, and you know, I will say that I have to just, sometimes I think I have to make a conscious effort to come back and say, NO you know Jesus is the way, is the *only* way.

The question of Jesus as the "*only* way to salvation" might still have been hanging around in the background of their thoughts as they answered this different one. However, when I point out the inconsistency between their answers both appear surprised and laugh. It seems that they have not realized or, at least, consciously realized, the connection themselves. With our shared laughter hanging in the air, the space now feels safe enough to try pursuing the salvation topic again.

On the one hand, Maureen and Joe are drawn to the idea that non-Christians can "be saved."

As Maureen later ponders, “You could say, well, everybody’s going to a Heaven of sorts; there are just different paths.” Conversely, they both feel a real need to make a “conscious” break from going down that particular path of belief: “I have to make a conscious effort and come back and say, no you know Jesus is the . . . only way.” I parse out this play between unconscious and conscious desires on the fly and intuitively begin nudging at it to open up a space for rethinking salvation and potentially reframing evangelism and discipleship practices.

Maureen gives me cues and hunches about the social worlds that have formed her competing theological visions. She has “been taught,” as she puts it, both explicitly and implicitly, that “Jesus Christ is the *only way* to salvation.” She describes her childhood faith, with a dramatic flair to her tone: “God was not a friendly God. God was gonna getcha!” And when, in adulthood, she moved into more moderate Baptist churches—ones that didn’t condemn drinking alcohol or ordaining women, for example—her family of origin was critical of her choices.³¹ She therefore carries a visceral sense of the types of risk entailed by thinking outside the box. But she has also *been taught* through activities like reading and forging friendship with non-Christians that there might be “different paths” to Heaven. Each of the practices that have shaped who she is over a lifetime bears an “implicit pedagogy,” in Bourdieu’s words, each one able to “instill a whole cosmology.”³² But that cosmology—or cosmologies—is rife with conflicting realities for Maureen. Her theological reasoning is much too complex, therefore, to allow momentary conscious decisions to exclude one of these social formations from competing for her allegiance.

Moments of tension and slippage between these formations—these different ad hoc, context specific everyday theologies—provide space for more systematic or historical reflection on why the tensions arise, and I find myself wanting to enter this space with Maureen. For me as researcher, the conversation is poised to produce some valuable insights about everyday theologies of salvation. The minister in me wants to coach Maureen into deeper understanding and fresh insight, while also tending to the emotional dimensions of her faith. As a friend, I’m wondering if we should just crack a bottle of wine and relax into it (an activity that would certainly press against some of the restrictions entailed in my IRB research agreement!).

I begin somewhat tentatively and ask her why she feels she needs to remind herself consciously to believe a doctrine that is failing to work with her growing view of the world:

Maureen: [*after a pause*] I think I’m afraid not to.

Me: Why?

Maureen: I think it’s because this is what I’ve always been taught, that the only way you’ll get to Heaven is through Jesus.” [*she pauses, then picks up speed*] . . . and then all of a sudden if I say no, what if it is? What if it is only through Jesus and then I don’t go to Heaven because I’m saying it’s not through Jesus?

As soon as the words come out of her mouth, she begins laughing at herself. Joe and I join in, our shared laughter relaxing us all again. It is difficult to let go of something that one has “always

been taught,” even when we are aware of an alternative teaching. At the same time, articulating the fear seems to undermine its power for Maureen, and the minister in me wants to help her along this path.

Maureen’s habituation comes with such assurance that it is difficult for her to “condemn” anyone who likewise “just feel[s] so right in their own faith, the way they were raised.” The very power that affirms her belief is the same one that undermines it, however, and this is perhaps why the language of fear characterizes her description of why she believes in this way. If we all feel equally sure of conflicting accounts of salvation, how can we know who is right? Entertaining such a thought is scary for Maureen because it impinges on her sense of her own eternal fate precisely by impinging on the possibility of certainty at all. So, as our conversation continues to help Maureen articulate her fears, I see them chipped away at again and again, only to return again in different forms.

With each phase of the conversation, Maureen brings new theological topics to the table, each arising intuitively from the fluid theological logic of her everyday Christian living. At one point she raises the concern that it is her doubts, her inability to hold to a belief as firmly as she thinks she should, that block her ability to live her faith more fully. Speaking more rapidly, again with anxiety creeping in to her tone, she says:

You wouldn’t believe, Natalie, how many times I’ve prayed that the Holy Spirit come into me. I don’t know that I’ve ever felt the Holy Spirit, you know? And I look at all these people I admire and they just seem to have it together and I’m thinking, is there something wrong with me, that I don’t have that wash over me?³³

As Maureen’s fear becomes more apparent, I feel myself wanting to slip out of the research mode into one of ministerial care even more. Instinctively, I drop my pencil and lean across the table toward her. When I listen to the recording later, I hear my voice get softer in this moment as I speak. Here is where things get really messy for me.

I realize in the moment—and even more so with hindsight—that by continuing to ask questions about Maureen’s doubts, I gain a deeper insight into her theological reasoning, and thus aid my research project. But these gains to my academic project are wrapped up in the pastoral care she explicitly requests by asking me her own questions of faith and doubt rather than just answering the theological queries as I frame them. Numerous desires, dispositions, instincts and impulses battle each other in this moment: I want both the theological insight and to offer care. But things are moving too quickly for me to establish with certainty if the two are in conflict.

Worse, in the moment, while I know that I dropped my pencil and lowered my tone to communicate care, I am a little less clear on my motivations for such communication. Is this a pure desire to comfort a congregant? Or to empathize with a friend? Or am I communicating care because I know it will get Maureen to keep giving me the information that will help my project? Indeed, in the moment, it is likely a mix of all three. I feel a twinge of guilt about the admixture and wonder if I should shut the whole thing down. Yet, while guilt is my dominant feeling, the logic of that guilt

does not prevail, and so once again I press on.

There is no clean-cut path of choice between the research and ministerial roles here and the way that the two seem to connect in my role as friend. To be faithful in the moment to the multiplicity of my roles, and to my own various desires, remembering that those desires are not all self-serving, and that even self-serving desires are not necessarily *selfish*, requires, instead, some sort of a shuffle back and forth between them. It requires allowing each role's performance to slip fluidly into another, so that there is space for movement and overlap among them.

So, I do not turn off my recording device—an option that is always available to me if I want, quite literally, to switch off my researcher role and prioritize the role of minister or friend. Indeed, this is a strategy I sometimes employed in other interviews when they became particularly emotional—and part of me regrets the loss of that data. Given that no one ever asked me to “go off the record,” perhaps I was being overly (even paternalistically?) protective of my conversation partners. But though my recording device has an easily flipped switch, I do not. I thus needed to find a way to hold all my roles in some sort of loose integration. By leaving the recorder on, I allowed my movement into a more explicit ministerial role to remain a part of the research record.³⁴ At the same time, my reflexive decision was far from the kind of *habitus* prioritization a sociologist like Bourdieu writing about reflexivity would recommend.

That moment of decision haunts me still. Should I just have turned the recorder off? Should I have explicitly reminded Maureen of my research role so that she could have the chance to self-regulate the emotional searching of her own questions? These doubts indicate that I probably did not find the right balance in the moment. Unlike the atemporal nature of researching with theological texts—an academic practice that allows me to “converse” with people separated from me not only by years, but by millennia—researching with human subjects—partners—requires immediate response.

Doing my best with this fluid, performative role integration, I ask Maureen, “Do you think they [these people you admire] believe without any ...?” But she cuts me off quickly. The amount of prompting she needs at this point is minimal. She has been looking for someone with whom to discuss this concern for a while. “I don't know!!” she exclaims, her voice squeaking a little, “They seem to, from what they say!”

The anxiety in her tone leads me to make my voice calm: “Actually, it usually takes a few questions, but most people end up here where you are in these interviews.” I wince a little as I realize this is not entirely true. I have accidentally overstated the case to comfort her, and I can't take it back now. Nevertheless, it is true that everyone I interviewed recounted doubts that they have with regards to orthodox Christian faith, so I emphasize this. Maureen remains unconvinced.

What about the “ex-pastors or retired pastors” from our class, she asks. “When you ask them questions like this ... do they have the same thoughts?” “Yes,” I respond, instinctively smiling in a way I hope will reassure her. “They do?” she asks incredulously, furrowing her brow and leaning in. “Yeah,” I respond. I stumble to find words to clarify that I am talking now about “people I know

training in the ministry”— I want to be careful not to disclose details from other interviews! “My sense is that *we* have the most doubts,” I share, because we “spend the most time thinking about it and discovering more and more of what [we] don’t know, and discovering that what we do know is such a small part of the puzzle.”

Now I feel vulnerable because I have moved into a realm of self-disclosure and mutuality. But this move seems to help: Maureen’s pace, tone and speech become more relaxed as we tackle some less intense topics to close out the interview. We do not reach any definitive theological conclusions that we could cleanly articulate,³⁵ but the conversation itself seems to have offered comfort and, I hope, has opened up some new possibilities for theological thought and action.

Reflexive Theology as a Relational Task

Conversations like this alerted me to the need to ask and answer questions about reflexivity anew in theological fieldwork contexts and in ways that are oriented towards theological disciplinary ends. Because Maureen and I participated in the same types of Christian social practices together—not least of which was weekly worship together on Sundays—there was significant, organic and inextricable overlap between both of our everyday theological inquiries and my academic theological inquiry. As already noted, it is this overlap between everyday and academic theologies that implicates me in the practices I study, as well as which enables me to contribute to their ongoing shape. Shaping Christian practice is an explicit goal of Christian theology, and ethnography can help us do that shaping. As this case study demonstrates, however, there are ethical gray areas in so doing. The case study, therefore, offers a site from which to begin asking the questions that will map those gray areas because it highlights some of the different roles theologians might need to negotiate in our particular fieldwork locations.

As noted above, Bourdieu advises sociological ethnographers to prioritize their scientific or academic *habitus* over any bodily wisdom they may gain in and of their field. The sociologist who leans too heavily on such fragmentary subjective knowledge has forgotten that she does not truly belong, argues Bourdieu. Attempts to gain the insider’s bodily knowledge are never adequate, and so the sociologist must reflexively reaffirm her own scientific *habitus* by an explicit accounting for the *habitus* that she is studying. Instead of participant observation, then, she does a participant *objectification* that brings to detailed light the conditions that created the particular forms of practical knowledge she lacks. In so doing, the sociological ethnographer rightly prioritizes her research role over any nascent sense of belonging to her field of study that might be developing.³⁶

As we see in this case study, I certainly played the role of researcher. Prioritizing this role was undesirable to me, however, because doing so would have limited my capacity to relate to Maureen in the minister and friend roles her questions explicitly elicited. Moreover, prioritizing the researcher role was impossible. Given that I already embodied multiple roles in my relationship with Maureen, sublimating one or more of them would have seemed “unnatural” to our relational

dynamic. When Tanner argues that academic theologians turn “practical answers to practical problems” into “intellectual answers to intellectual problems,” she seems to position the theological field of study according to Bourdieu’s sense for the intellectual distance sociologists seek.³⁷ And in so doing, she misses naming the types of emotional and relational dynamics (evident in my conversation with Maureen) that take place in the interaction of everyday and academic theological speech. I agree with Tanner that academic theology needs to make such moves if it is to play its role within a broader theological project well. However, neither her method nor Bourdieu’s offers sufficient insight into how to negotiate the messiness of embodying multiple roles in one’s field simultaneously.

Therefore, to honor the communal production of theological knowledge that Maureen and I shared required that I attend not only to that knowledge and the trajectories of its historical cultural constitution, but also to the relational dynamics playing out between us. IRBs and other ethnographic ethics guidelines help ethnographic theologians craft our interview methods and questions to avoid harming our research subjects. And given the history of unethical practices perpetrated in research with human subjects—e.g., the psychological damage inflicted by the infamous Stanford Prison and Milgram experiments, as well as the implication of research methods with various colonial projects—these guidelines are crucially important. Nevertheless, they are often less helpful for negotiating the types of mutuality inherent to more recent feminist ethnographic projects, such as those that shift the focus from research subjects to research partners.³⁸ In particular, they can be less helpful for negotiating the social and theological mutuality that can be experienced in theological fieldwork sites. What happens, then, when a research partner directs her own questions of life-impacting import back at the theological researcher, minister and friend? What happens when instead of focusing reflexivity through an ethics of “do no harm,” we focus it through an ethics of flourishing?

Were I a sociologist studying Balinese cockfights, Kabyle kinship practices or the social world of boxing, for example, my research partners would likely not look to me for answers to the pressing questions that arise from their practices. Even if I were conducting a form of Action Research, I would offer summaries and interpretations of my research partners’ practices and beliefs to them subsequent to the close of our conversations.³⁹ With theological fieldwork, however, my academic training presents me to my research partners as someone who can help them navigate theological problems—both intellectually and existentially—for themselves within the midst of the fieldwork discussions. We can offer each other theological insight and negotiate together new possibilities for the life of faith together.

These are the possibilities of Reflexive Theology, but as we see in the case study, there are also problems. I still have concerns that I missed the ethical mark in my conversation with Maureen, which I continue to work out in our ongoing relationship with each other. Indeed, this is perhaps one of the core responsibilities related to asking questions about reflexivity in a theological context: the sphere of relationship—a shared form of faith—does not end when the research is done

and the text is written. Attention to reflexivity in a theological context, in fact, is a relational task that holds open the sphere in which theology can be pursued as a communal practice indefinitely.

In the moment of the ethnographic interview, however, we see that I negotiated my various roles with Maureen intuitively, slipping in and out of them in ways that sometimes felt right and sometimes felt fraught—but always in response to what was developing between us. This means that the reflexive theologian cannot fully work out the norms for how to handle the mutuality of a theological conversation in advance without denying the interviewee's agency in co-shaping the parameters of shared discourse. Responding adequately to the needs and desires of all conversation partners necessitates that the reflexive theologian negotiate all her relevant roles in the moment—whatever her own personal admixture of roles might be. She cannot prioritize one to the exclusion of others, but rather must embody them loosely enough to create space for movement between them and time to allow individual and integrative performances of each.

That being said, trusting my intuition in the moment is not an adequate standard for accuracy in representation and ethical data collection. Such intuition must be brought to articulation if we are to do theology *from* the body, enabling everyday and academic theologies to converse with each other until they produce fresh theological insights and new possibilities for Christian living.

Reflexive Theology in Three Modes

By reflecting on the three inter-permeating roles I played in my conversation with Maureen, I hope to generate a conversation that brings the intuitive moments of Reflexive Theology to articulation. Of course, when theologians ask questions about reflexivity in their fieldwork contexts, the roles performed may well differ from these ones that are particular to Maureen's and my relationship. Part of the task of Reflexive Theology entails reflecting on which theological goods arise from the particular roles that a field of study produces. In this way, Reflexive Theology truly is a relational task.

Playing the researcher role with Maureen entailed a certain sort of power on my part: to be interpreter, but not necessarily interpreted. Here I constructed a line of theological inquiry that opened up and explored her musings. As the researcher, the academic theological goods I sought were external to my research subject, Maureen. In fact, in the mode of researcher, I related to Maureen more as research subject than as research partner as I tried to interpret her everyday theological reasoning in light of her life experiences and faith practices. In this mode, the goods produced out of our relationship related primarily to understanding the everyday theology she espoused. This role, while crucial for my particular reflexive theological mode of inquiry, was not enough to meet its full criteria. In following Bourdieu's prioritization of the research *habitus* over the *habitus* related to the field of study, if only for a moment, I also prioritized theological insight over new modes of living.

Like the role of researcher, the role of minister also came with a certain sort of power: to offer

care, rather than to receive it. In this role, the goods I sought were proper to the subject in my care, Maureen. She required—even explicitly asked me for—pastoral care that I am trained to offer. Indeed, with her request, Maureen invited me into what Mary Clark Moschella calls “ethnography as pastoral practice”—that is, a form of “pastoral listening” that is a “potential means of spiritual growth and social transformation” precisely because it empowers individuals and communities to find their own voices.⁴⁰ Doing ethnography in the role of minister, while also crucial in my Reflexive Theology, momentarily prioritized the goal of opening up new possibilities for Christian living over that of producing fresh theological insight. Moreover, as was evident in the story’s telling, our conversation opened up these new possibilities for Maureen more than it did for me. I fail to name how my own Christian living was impacted by our encounter precisely because my inability to strike the right balance as I performed my various roles undermined the full potential for mutuality between us.

There were moments, however, when this mutuality surfaced, even fragmentarily. In the moments when I felt we were performing the roles of friends, Maureen and I experienced reciprocity to interpret and care for each other. These were perhaps the messiest, riskiest moments of all, when I struggled with whether or not to keep the recorder recording. But they were also the moments when Maureen’s everyday theological reasoning had the power to speak back to the academic theologies with which I engaged it. This mode of friendship was risky because it called for mutual vulnerability, but that mutual vulnerability also had the potential to enable mutually beneficial conversation. The power dynamics of this reciprocity opened up the chance for us to be research partners, rather than positioning her as my research subject or a subject of care. But they also opened up the chance for us to do harm to one another. The mutuality of theological modes of reasoning thus creates space for Reflexive Theology to reflect more deeply into this interaction of friendship. The theological texts it produces are marked to their core with this moment of risk.

Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that theological ethnographers must attend to questions of reflexivity anew because our fields of study shape our academic practices in ways that our colleagues doing ethnography in the social sciences do not experience. Even when we do not embody the type of hyper-belonging in relation to our fields as I did to mine, the nature of theology as an academic practice that is grounded in broader Christian social practices means that our research partners and we participate in similar historical and cultural trajectories. This overlap is the very thing that implicates us in and enables us directly and indirectly to impact the practices we study. This overlap means that Reflexive Theologies are by nature hybrid and always incomplete, with contradictions built into them.

But in this mode of incompleteness, these theologies also remain open to ongoing refinement. They remain open to their own undoing in an affirmation that we can never capture the Spirit with

our words. And so they are humble. While offering the constructive theological insights of Reflexive Theology remain beyond the scope of this essay's methodological focus, I want to gesture toward their shape in closing. Much in the same way that theologians have used ethnography to offer descriptive ecclesiologies that contain within them the seeds of their own unraveling,⁴¹ so too does Reflexive Theology offer a similar potential to engage other doctrines. As we see at moments in the case study outlined here, Reflexive Theology reveals the frailty of salvation, not its assurance. In so doing it offers theologies that, while executed in a mode of their own unraveling, nevertheless endeavor to make visible a facet of a relationship in which we hope some glimmer of the Divine be encountered.

(Endnotes)

1 For these examples in the field of theology, see Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner, eds., *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). For a primer in reflexivity within the field of sociology, see Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

2 Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 20.

3 Pete Ward, ed., *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 7.

4 *Ibid.*, 6-7. Here Ward references Julie Scott Jones and Sal Watt, eds., *Ethnography in Social Science Practice* (London: Routledge, 2010), 6, regarding the seven core values of ethnography.

5 Scharen and Vigen, 21. Ward, 7.

6 I borrow the phrase “research partners” from feminist ethnographic epistemologies and use it rather than “research subjects” or “informants” because I want to emphasize our community’s co-production of social and theological knowledge. See Virginia Oleson, “Early Millennial Feminist Qualitative Research: Challenges and Countours,” in *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne Lincoln (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2005).

7 Ward, 7. These questions of ethnographic ethics are perhaps brought home most powerfully by Indigenous critiques of ethnographic research methods, which thus far have remained largely unengaged in works written by ethnographic theologians. See Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books, 1999) and Leslie Brown and Susan Strega, eds., *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, (Toronto: Canadian Scholars/Women’s Press, 2005).

8 Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

9 Ibid., 4-5.

10 Ibid., 5.

11 The line between social and theological difference is an overlapping, permeable one, as theological beliefs and practices are, of course, always also shaped by their social location.

12 Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 412-453.

13 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

14 Loïc Wacquant, *Body and Soul: Notes of an Apprentice Boxer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

15 Bourdieu, *Outline*, 2ff.

16 While the concept of *habitus* is not new—its genesis can be traced to Aristotle—its contemporary theological usage draws primarily on Bourdieu’s contemporary reformulation of it as “schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class” (Bourdieu, *Outline*, 86). *Habitus* limns a theoretical structure for mapping the site where the “objective structures” that make up a particular field of practice meet with and constitute a subject’s knowledgeable agency *and* the ways in which that constituted agency simultaneously shapes and reshapes those same objective structures.

17 For fuller definitions of everyday and academic theologies, see Tanner, *Theories*, ch.4.

18 Ibid., 80.

19 Ibid., 71.

20 Ibid., 76.

21 Ibid.

22 Academic theology’s implication in broader Christian social practices should not, however, be confused with total subsidiarity to them. Like the sociologist in Bourdieu’s scheme, the ethnographic theologian must also account for the differences between her academic *habitus* and the *habitus* of her field. The academic theologian is shaped by academic practices that are non-theological as well as those that are. Moreover, because there is not one single defined Christian *habitus*, the theologian who studies a community that is not her own must account for the differences between her own bodily wisdom of Christian practice—inculcated either through participation in ecclesial life or through the academic study of Christian practice—and the bodily wisdom inherent to the particular site she studies.

23 That I left FBC within a year of finishing my study there has nothing to do with my affection for the church. I left because, having finished my doctorate, I needed to pursue employment elsewhere.

24 Loïc Wacquant, “Carnal Connections: On Embodiment, Apprenticeship, and Membership,” *Qualitative Sociology*, 28, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 457. In this article, Wacquant defends his own immersion into training at a boxing gym against allegations that he obscures his racial difference from (thus emphasizing his belonging or membership among) the men with whom he trains. Wacquant’s methods perhaps come closest

to ethnographic theology in that he, too, became inculcated with his field of study's *habitus*. Significant differences also remain however: in particular, the lack of organic connection between the field of study and the modes of inquiry, as already outlined. Further exploration of these differences, however, remains beyond the scope of this article.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., italics Wacquant's.

27 Ibid., 446.

28 The data collection of these classroom conversations functioned somewhat like a group interview process. I would arrive each week with an agenda for discussion that was based on the theological topics for the week. After a short introductory lecture—which, of course, is where this process functions less like a group interview process—we would engage the material, ask questions of each other, and converse in response to each other. I recorded all these meetings with the informed consent of the participants and transcribed them later. This style of group interview—with mutual reciprocity oriented to a shared task—is also somewhat like an Action Research method. With Action Research methods, the researcher participates actively in a community of practice, with the whole group working together to reflect on and respond to a particular set of problems or concerns. For more on action research, see Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007). For more on the relationship between Action Research methods and theology, see Helen Cameron et al., *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

29 For example, when we read Beatrice of Nazareth together, the group initially bristled against what seemed to them to be Beatrice's attempt to "earn her salvation." I helped tease out the Reformation polemics at the heart of their concerns, and some of the people in the group began recognizing how their unquestioned assumptions about salvation led them to mistrust the veracity of their Catholic friends' faith. At the same time, I tended to read Beatrice through Neo-Platonic, Pseudo-Dionysian lenses, or through a critical historical, postcolonial understanding of mysticism. As some of the group interpreted Beatrice's experiences through their own practices of gardening as a spiritual exercise, they disrupted my usual read of her *as text*, and in so doing opened up the text to me in fresh ways.

30 For example, I had been reading Laurel C. Schneider's work, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

31 Of course, these more moderate Baptist churches would also confess an exclusivist soteriology. Their theological difference from Maureen's childhood church is that they would be more likely to emphasize God's love over God's wrath within that soteriological framework.

32 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980), 69.

33 FBC is not a church where we often pray for the Spirit to fill us. There are pockets of resistance to such charismatic versions of Christian faith, even as there are also pockets that promote it. But the vast majority of members reside between these two poles. For Maureen to frame her fear as missing out on the full power

of the “Holy Spirit com[ing] into [her],” perhaps grows out of her prior, childhood ecclesial formation in a church that in its discursive and other practices emphasized the relationship between purity, certainty and faith.

34 Given that I objectify myself as part of this ethnographic narrative, it is perhaps worth emphasizing the somewhat obvious point that the recorder records not just Maureen’s responses, but mine as well. When I listen to it later, I conduct data analysis of myself as a character in the story, as well as Maureen and Joe. Indeed, given the emotional complexity of the intertwined roles I play in the site, I often lose track of my ability to observe what is happening in the midst of the action. The recordings give me a much better sense of my own behavior than my memory can do.

35 The theological proposals constructed in our classroom conversations, which are the focus of the larger project within which these reflections are situated, remain beyond the methodological scope of this article.

36 Bourdieu, *Outline*, ch.1.

37 Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 80.

38 See note 6 above.

39 It is worth noting that Joe and Maureen have both been given earlier versions of this story to read and comment on, as is common practice in ethnography—a point that I am grateful to my research assistant, Robert Timmins, for insisting that I emphasize. Along these lines, I am also grateful to Travis Ables and Tyler Wigg-Stevenson for reading and offering feedback on this article at various points in its development.

40 Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*. (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2008), 12-13.

41 See, in particular, the volumes in Eerdmans’ series “Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography.”