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ETHNOGRAPHIC THEOLOGY: INTEGRATING THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Teología etnográfica: integración de las Ciencias Sociales y la reflexión teológica

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Abstract

Theologians are widely embracing ethnographic research to accomplish their theological work. However, since most theologians are not substantively trained in social scientific methods, their sophistication with this methodology is limited, leading to distortions in recorded observations and proffered interpretations. This essay seeks to address this lack of depth by articulating some of the most essential sensitivities that are crucial to the best practices associated with exemplary scholarship emerging at the intersection of ethnography and theology. Among the most important distinctions that theologians must recognize is a simple, heuristic distinction between “found theologies” and “imposed theologies”. Ethnographers know that reporting our findings always requires a careful examination of the assumptions that may unwittingly constrain what we recognize, let alone “see.” The distinction offered between “found theologies” and “imposed theologies” serves to remind theologically concerned field workers that unexamined ideals and prejudices as well as deeply held values and convictions can radically direct our attention and creatively reshape our perceptions. It also allows insightful focus on the dynamics of power as well as inclusion of marginalized peoples. My modest goal, therefore, is to further equip theologically-oriented scholars to produce original, social-scientifically conscientious, yet substantively rich and responsible works that further innovate the use of social science methodology among theologians. Ultimately, by further substantiating the ethics of ethnographic practice among theologians, students and scholars will accentuate the integrity of findings and produce streams of scholarship that will foster the unexpected and urgently needed theologies of the future.

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Keywords

Ethnography; Ethnographic Theology; Social Science Research; Theologizing; Theological Method; Theological Construction; Methodology.

Resumen

Los teólogos están adoptando ampliamente la investigación etnográfica para realizar su trabajo teológico. Sin embargo, dado que la mayoría de ellos no están suficientemente capacitados en métodos científicos sociales, su sofisticación con esta metodología es limitada, lo que genera distorsiones en las observaciones registradas y las interpretaciones ofrecidas. Este ensayo busca abordar esta falta de profundidad al articular algunas de las sensibilidades más esenciales que son cruciales para las mejores prácticas asociadas con la erudición ejemplar que emerge en la intersección entre la etnografía y la teología. Entre las distinciones más importantes que los teólogos deben reconocer está una distinción simple y heurística entre “teologías encontradas” y “teologías impuestas”. Los etnógrafos saben que reportar nuestros hallazgos siempre implica examinar de manera cuidadosa las suposiciones que pueden restringir involuntariamente lo que reconocemos, sin hablar de “lo que vemos”. La distinción ofrecida entre “teologías encontradas” y “teologías impuestas” sirve para recordar a los trabajadores de campo preocupados por la teología que los ideales y prejuicios no examinados, así como los valores y las convicciones profundamente arraigados, pueden dirigir radicalmente nuestra atención y remodelar creativamente nuestras percepciones. También permite un enfoque perspicaz sobre la dinámica del poder, así como la inclusión de los pueblos marginados. Mi modesto objetivo, por lo tanto, es equipar mejor a los académicos teológicamente orientados para producir obras originales, social y científicamente concienzudas, mas sustancialmente ricas y responsables que innoven aún más el uso de la metodología de las ciencias sociales entre los teólogos. En última instancia, al fundamentar aún más la ética de la práctica etnográfica entre teólogos, los estudiantes y los académicos acentuarán la integridad de los hallazgos y producirán corrientes de erudición que fomentarán las teologías insospechadas y urgentemente necesitadas del futuro.

Palabras clave

Etnografía; Teología etnográfica; Investigación en ciencias sociales; Teologizar; Método teológico; Construcción teológica; Metodología.

Introduction

Theologians have increasingly used ethnographic research methods to strengthen the connections between their theological constructions and the social practices they seek to impact. The desire and the use for ethnography have increased, however understanding that the challenges and tensions involved in integrating social scientific methods into theological methods is haphazard, contentious, and highly controversial.

A handful of seminaries and divinity schools offer courses in ethnography (including Boston University, Emory, Duke, and more), yet agreement on curriculum is thin, and graduate students often flounder in their attempt to grasp what is happening “on the ground” as they pursue distinctly theological interests.

For nearly ten years now, I have been involved in conversations and debates at the intersection of ethnography and theology, especially through the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion. There, I have met with and presented papers alongside theologians whose scholarship has engaged in the epistemological possibilities inherent to practices of deep belonging and social scientific methodology. As a sociologist of religion, my scholarship has largely focused on religious congregations, including close accounts of differing theological orientations and their connection both to the practices within churches and to the broader societal shifts of the larger culture. Conference sessions and workshops have been well-attended, even when fees have been required, with workshops filling to capacity *in just two days* after registration. In 2015, attendance was expanded twice more, finally “maxing out” at 90 attendees and featured presentations and facilitators from the UK and USA and a mix of theologians, social scientists, and religionists (e.g., Mary Fulkerson, Luke Bretherton, Christian Scharen, Kathleen Garces-Foley, Kathleen Jenkins, Pete Ward, James Spickard, Todd Whitmore, Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, and myself). The four-hour workshop effectively demonstrated strong, interdisciplinary interest in ethnographic theology; at the same time, our conversations opened the many tensions and ambiguities involved in such cross-disciplinary work.

Although many indicators point to the groundswell of the deliberate use of ethnography to accomplish theological work (e.g., Ammerman et al. 1998; Bretherton 2012; Fulkerson 2007; Scharen 2015; Scharen and Vigen 2011; Ward 2012; Whitmore 2019; Wigg-Stevenson 2014), our understanding of ethnographic theology remains limited, and obtaining reliable guidance for the sensitivities required for this work is difficult. This essay seeks to address the lack of depth in understanding and information by indicating some essential sensitivities that are crucial to the best practices associated with exemplary scholarship emerging at the intersection of ethnography and theology. My modest goal in these pages is to further equip theologically-oriented scholars to produce original, social-scientifically conscientious, yet substantively rich and responsible works that further innovate the use of social science methodology among theologians.

These are heady subjects that require careful exposition. A much greater scope of readings is likely and more in-depth discussions required to attain mastery in these methods, especially those who hope to teach others. Within the constraints of this essay, I wish to avoid bland generalizations or knee-jerk categorizations. My objective is to resource a more textured, nuanced approach to ethnographic theology by taking advantage of more recent theological considerations and sensitizing conceptualizations of ethnographic methodology. The reflections found here will equip us to explicitly confront the tendency toward isolating dogmatic assertions of “theology” from empirical pronouncements of “religion” or “anthropology” or “sociology” or any otherwise academic discipline. However incomplete this may be, I seek to leverage the growing appreciation of expanding the dialogue on ethnographic theology and offer a few careful distinctions necessary for accomplishing this work to its greatest level of rigor and utility.

Framework

Motivation for Ethnography among Theologians

The practice of ethnography—deliberate and long-term immersion into a social community for the explicit purpose of investigation, whether seemingly familiar or awkwardly strange—is a common research method among anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and even religious studies scholars. As the method is taken up by theologians, this form of research activity is introducing new considerations from scholars who are stimulating intensive lines of inquiry for intentional and non-traditional theological work. As a powerful form of research, ethnography offers more than occasions for mere personal reflexivity. Ethnography is replacing anecdote and speculation based on occasional and arbitrary observation with systematic recording to yield comparative and pattern-based knowledge. It is a fascinating tool for the discovery of human actions.

Expanding our capacity for discovery is the most basic reason to invoke ethnographic methods. However, among theologians, what appears to be stimulating the increased need for ethnographic methodology is that, by now, “most academic theologians agree that theology is always culturally located” (Wigg-Stevenson 2015). Nearly all concepts typically used in theological work, like *reason*, *discernment*, and *revelation*, require more careful conceptual argumentation. We are no longer free to use these (and other) terms uncritically. The epistemological ground has shifted decisively. As Sheila Greeve Davaney (2000: 148) writes, “religious interpretations of reality are contingent, tied to place and time, funded by the past and reflective of and contributors to present material and social relations.” Theologians now widely accept that beliefs and practices do not stand apart from culture but are constructed as part of an inevitable sociological process (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Sociality is central to theology as much as all social processes involve ongoing essential components that make up the entirety of human practice from birth to death. Broader societal change accelerates our slippery grasp on “established” truths such that theological statements that rely on their truth by being accepted as widely normative progressively become highly unreliable and, even more problematically, widely misunderstood apart from their originating context. New approaches are necessary to secure an alternative foundation for theological assertions.

For example, Natalie Wigg-Stevenson (2015) clearly elucidates how the borders separating heresy, heterodoxy and orthodoxy from each other are increasingly difficult for academic theologians to maintain. She writes, “That there is no longer a stable, *a priori* structure available for the theologian to use that can automatically authorize the normative status of her theological sources and claims does not mean that all her claims become relative, [yet] even the most textual and traditional of theological approaches can no longer presume the normative status of their own sources and claims.” Perhaps, given a more forthright acknowledgement of historical contingency, it would be more widely accepted that shared normativity alone cannot serve as the ultimate goal of Christian theologizing.

Of course, ethnographic work has practical significance to the ministry of pastors as well as lay leaders in congregations and other religious institutions (Ammerman et al. 1998; Moschella 2008). As much as dedicated practitioners may at times desire to avoid abstruse academic discussions, those who operate in concrete, everyday ministry settings know that “sound theology” is not a substitute for a careful analysis of the workings of their organizations. Incisive analysis is particularly urgent when faced with inescap-

able situations of conflict. The issues of power and authority, distribution of status and other resources, abrupt throttle-points that hinder pastoral care, fluctuating neighborhood dynamics, evolving networks of relationships, successive impacts of societal change, and much more are all aspects of ministerial work that require careful listening and observation in order to lead well. The ability to discern empirical patterns and report on them in a way that makes shared recognition and cooperative dialogue possible is vital to building and sustaining flourishing ministries. Therefore, the work of ethnographic theology is not intended to privilege academicians but to open possibilities for a broader constituency of participants to offer their own observations and insights, which can foster a form of discernment that healthy organizations should welcome as they operate in an ever-shifting social landscape.

Empirical data involves a presentation of systemically organized patterns of observations to others, offered as evidence to triangulate intangible phenomena (like care, identity, or solidarity). Consequently, the recording of observations in a systematic and theoretically sensitive manner is done in and for a community of shared knowledge. Scholars listen to and critique each other's work to compare findings and, when necessary, correct when bias may hinder a person's capacity to discern what is actually happening. Generating knowledge is never solitary but always interactive and always social (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Schutz 1967, 1970, 1973). Those who read ethnography and interact with other ethnographers quickly realize that there can be no monolithic "ethnographic approach" to observing social dynamics; and there certainly can be none in relation to theology. Theoretical considerations for how to frame social phenomena of interest (which involve conceptualizations and implications for our approaches to observing behavior) are contentious and always developing. Of course, theological orthodoxy is also inherently unstable and multivalent since theological schemas and systems continue to shift in unpredictable ways. As theological agendas and convictions change over time, they solicit new priorities and unanticipated points of focus.

For theologians who wish to conduct qualitative studies, this essay will sensitize them as researchers to pay attention to these social practices and structures with the potential to (re)shape theology, as well as to develop a greater ability to focus on forms of theology and how they may affect/reflect the structure of life and practice. By stepping into the stream of social change, theologians can more assuredly take on the challenge that there is no normative essence that we can grasp and hold on to with any sense of permanence. A theologically oriented understanding of ethnographic research may start with an open acknowledgment of one's own (often dearly held) theological normativity, yet one's investigation cannot end there. Given that all theologians face the normative challenge, it is helpful here to highlight that it is incumbent upon ethnographic theologians to confront this challenge; moreover, those who are willing to have proficiency in ethnographic theology will surely come to possess fruitful insights to share regarding how their colleagues and students might respond to it more productively.

Theology and Social Science

The work of ethnographic theology is approached here as a sort of collaboration between theologians and social scientists, with an emphasis on attention to the empirical dynamics of Christianity in a rapidly changing context. Increasingly, there is greater agreement amongst theologians and social scientists to accept that conventional models of Christian thought and ministry have changed over the past century

(with notable change even in just in the past few years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, see Baker et al. 2020). At the same time, theologians and social scientists have noted that church leaders continue to invoke increasingly strained approaches for the accomplishment of ministry, styles of management and speechmaking that alternatively ignore and/or react to broad social changes. Publications, podcasts, workshops, and sermons among a large swath of Christian leadership rest the weight of their arguments on an idealized past to project the need for a more stable future. However, such approaches are reduced to a type of reactionary rhetoric that is neither helpful nor realistic.

Although theologians and social scientists come from different disciplinary backgrounds, both of them find ethnography to be a productive tool for achieving rich insights. Over and over in recent years, theologians and social scientists (especially those engaged in questions of religion) have been struck by the number of people who are now engaging ethnographic methods (which includes pastors, church consultants, denominational leaders, and seminary professors) despite the paucity of expertise for the challenges involved in such work. The best ethnographic theology begins by reviewing widely held assumptions of sound scholarship alongside a growing grasp of “best practices” in their fields. While we may not be able to fully achieve a thoroughly realized synthesis and explanation of ethnographic theology, all of us engaged in this work can at least identify the complexity and diversity among theologians and social scientists in a way that can be both provocative and generative. Therefore, while the significance of ethnography for the work of theology demands more attention from both religious leaders and academics, there remains at the same time a need to embrace the existing diversity in the uses and application of ethnographic methodology and to apply such knowledge to continue reflecting and revising our research.

I focus on ethnographic theology primarily because there is a surge of people attempting this work, although it is poorly understood. By emphasizing the diversity of theologies made possible through ethnographic methods and briefly illustrating them from my own research, I understand that much more could be done to further accentuate the multiplicity of dimensions to discover. Frankly, many aspects of institutionalized Christian thought and practice are left ignored, unexamined, or even unexplained. Ethnographic methodology pushes against the willingness to ignore actual practices of social groups—their hierarchies, identities, performances, and structures—in favor of abstract theological dogma about how things “should” work. Indeed, the history of Christianity demonstrates the horrific extent of abuse, oppression, stigma, and trauma that can occur when idealized assumptions go unchallenged and destructive operations are left to run unchallenged.

Ethnographic theology meets a profound need in the Christian church. Our increased awareness of the contingency of truth claims fosters a desire to protect the validity of Christianity, seeking “whether she does so in an effort to maintain or disrupt the status quo” (Wigg-Stevenson 2015). Although theological claims have never gone unquestioned, the threats to validity and dangers of relativism pressure many devoted leaders to stress the supposed pristine superiority of theological truths. Those who represent and manage Christian institutions seem particularly drawn to proffering their own authoritative framing of Christian truths in a play for legitimacy. In rising above the messy nature of experiential reality, such narrations require essentialization and idealization—abstractions that raise the level of discussion to unsullied realms that are untouched by contingency or by controversy (Williams, 1992; Smith, 2004; Scharen, 2005). Once we take into account that human beings live embodied lives in a material world, it becomes easier to accept that Christians are people who operate similarly to the people around them and around the

globe. Obscuring the ugly controversies or less-than-perfect practices as somehow exceptional or unusual distorts our perceptions, limits our analysis, and cripples the utility of our reporting. Even more strongly, claiming that trauma and violence are aberrations to “true” Christianity leaves us blind to acknowledging how fundamental so many abuses have been in the history of the Church (Wigg-Stevenson 2015). Romanticizing keeps us from engaging the fullness of truth as is required by the integrity of our faith.

Consequently, it would be a mistake to approach ethnographic theology with front-loaded or one-sided disciplinary assumptions from either theology or social science. Rather, our collective and creative response to grappling with our understanding of the world involves seeking a wise and careful synthesis, perhaps not complete *integration* between theology and social science, but rather a lively, cross-disciplinary *interrelation*. The work of ethnographic theology strives for a more openly inquisitive attitude that is curious to the dynamics, welcomes alternative viewpoints, and allows for nuance of possible discoveries in our field of inquiry. Rather than reduce complex dynamics to vague generalities, growing scholarship in this area engages the many substantive methodological and theoretical issues that affect this practice of research. It is a shift in the dominant metaphor for describing the nature and the task of theology from that of proclamation to conversation (see Wigg-Stevenson 2015) that guides a fresh approach to theological articulation.

Drawing again on Natalie Wigg-Stevenson (2015), she usefully highlights the tension that exists between normative theological statements and descriptions of theological practice. “Dogma and description can be pitted against each other,” she writes. Particularly problematic is when previously accepted dogma is made to act as if such “knowledge” can be stated as descriptions of practice. Unsurprisingly, when descriptions fail to fit idealized visions of theologically-guided practice, a “Christian researcher” is left uncomfortable, with a feeling that highly valued organizations and institutions are threatened, which tempts loyal writers and interpreters to reduce unwanted descriptions to be, at best, illustrations of the failure to hold to proper dogma. The threat to orthodoxy is palpable, and the need to protect the future of the Christianity represented by the institution is invoked (Brophy 2016). But is ethnographic theology intended to merely reproduce a dogmatic orthodoxy? Of course not. Rather, resonant with Wigg-Stevenson, the work of ethnographic theology is productive to the extent that it serves to challenge and potentially reshape traditional theological normativity. The author provides more orientation to this temptation, drawing on an influential article written by Adams and Elliot (2000), who argued that “ethnography is dogmatics.” Their approach to method proposes theological descriptions of concrete situations, saying, “We are describing things, although not naively, as they appear to two Christians who are trying to make God’s story our story... We are trying to describe God’s world...” (Adams and Elliot, 2000: 347).

In practice, such dependence on theological dogma ends up absorbing precise description of empirical dynamics, losing crucial distinctions between presumption and observation, making the latter disappear since only details that fit the writer’s take on “God’s story” are permitted. And when unexpected events are stated to be “miracles” (358), rather than pushing for a more complete explanation, an eschatological dogma will shape the argument, molding the narrative into an unfolding story conformed to its acceptable redemptive value. Overall, narrative approaches that insist on favoring a pre-determined theology tolerate a glossing over of specific social dynamics as unnecessary and even disturbing, let alone avoiding the opportunity to work with available social scientific observations and insights that would allow a more careful and more useful understanding and evaluation of happenings and situations.

More recent work in ethnographic theology encourages recognition of varied theological modes that are found in both academic and every-day forms of theology. When we understand theology itself to be a cultural practice, the ethnographic theologian, who engages research with a critical reflexivity, can better examine practices theologically, but also better theologize on actual human practices. Recall the work of Kathryn Tanner (1997) who demonstrates theology as indeed a cultural and contingent practice. Rather than rely solely on text-based sources, ethnography brings in observation of contemporary practices and interviews with living subjects. Moreover, the ethnographic theologian engages in the profound opportunity to lean into neglected and marginalized populations. Where centers of power and privilege selectively have introduced or ignored different people and populations, the systematic practice of social science seeks to ensure that the unseen are noticed and documented.

Here is an opportunity to note that the practice of ethnographic theology is not necessarily new. Famously, the friar and theologian Bartholome de las Casas, advocating and writing in the 1500s, confronted the dogmatic theologians of his day, seeking to overcome their presumptions built on established canon in order to draw in new, more humane insights, rooted in his observations and interactions directly with the indigenous people affected by the Spanish Conquest (see Gutierrez 1993). It may be argued that Las Casas was the first modern ethnographic theologian.

Being free from the constraints of merely mirroring dogma, ethnographic theologians have the capacity to exercise their imagination, breaking their own established paradigms to build the capacity to perceive other aspects of the social world. With new perceptions, the possibilities for new theologies ensue. Rather than simply “applying” theology to observations, the embodied immersion of the ethnographic theologian allows for a creative shaping of theologically distinctive narratives that can take into account the steady—and sometimes abrupt—knowledges that come from new circumstances, new situations, new identities, and new challenges. By operating in fresh scholarly dialogues, mixing and integrating developing concepts alongside observable empirical patterns, an unpredictably stimulating scope of research opens up. Not only might we discover new things in the realm of the spiritual, but we may also participate in fostering new forms of collegiality and community, one that welcomes the church and the people in and around it, instead of dismissing it or just “speaking to” it.

In the end, developing trends in the enactment of ethnographic theology seek a different approach to observation, one that tricks us from our profound perspectival bias, and one that produces a more complex discernment of belief and behavior. The goal embraced in this work is to avoid a competitive stance between “theology” and “social science,” avoiding hierarchical disciplinary presumptions that will always seek to influence our analysis. Webster (2012:201) rightly states that “resistance to idealism commonly underlies appeals for the deployment of the social sciences in ecclesiology.” What is required is the building of a distinctive scholarly virtue, specifically, a new form of “theological humility” (Wiggs-Stevenson 2015).

The Challenge of Theological Ethnography

The practice of ethnography poses several challenges to the researcher. Even the most careful observations are incomplete and full of gaps, and we must constantly keep in mind that our presumptions fill in gaps

to craft a cogency to fits our pre-held schemas. The most immediate challenge is that insights generated by participant observation are constantly at risk of being distorted by personal presumptions and variously asserted “truths.” This is especially problematic when researchers enter the field of observation with strongly held convictions and compelling worldviews. Among those who value theology, a person’s faith can discount empirical observation in favor of asserting convictions regarding the invisible and unseen. A commitment to engage in ethnography already opens the theologian to discovery. Ultimately, the capacity for “surprise” may be one of the greatest achievements of a successful ethnography (Guyer 2013; McKearney 2021; Shweder 1997).

Rather than supposing that armchair ruminations on the nature of humanity (what theologians often call “anthropology”) is sufficient for grasping the complexity of individuals and their communities, especially with the multiply changed circumstances of our contemporary world, ethnographic methodology often forces theologians to root their ideas in diligently recorded data taking account of contextual circumstances. As more theologians embrace ethnography to accomplish their theological work, it is important to acknowledge that being open to discovery is easily thwarted. It is so difficult to overcome presuppositions that ethnographers in the social sciences make intentional efforts to develop various sensitivities to overcome the hazards of using our own selves as instruments for research. Showing up to observe and taking notes is not enough. Ethnographers develop self-disciplines to guard against unavoidable presumptions.

Among the most important distinctions that theologians must recognize is what I have labeled as a simple, heuristic distinction between “found theologies” and “imposed theologies” (Martí 2016a, 2023). Ethnographers know that reporting our findings always requires a careful examination of the assumptions that may unwittingly constrain what we recognize, let alone “see” (Lichterman 2017). The distinction offered between “found theologies” and “imposed theologies” serves to remind theologically concerned field workers that unexamined ideals and prejudices as well as deeply held values and convictions can radically direct our attention and creatively reshape our perceptions.

The phrase “imposed theology” is a heuristic to remind us of a readily observed phenomenon: strongly held values and idealized schemata can reframe observations (i.e. “data”) to fit pre-existing frameworks. When doing ethnography, theologians are challenged to accurately record and analyze observations; the associated challenge is not to impose what “counts” as observations from a theology that already orders and “explains” those observations (Martí 2010). To prevent such action, the distinction between “found theologies” and “imposed theologies” is a means to stimulate researcher reflexivity on the production of knowledge based on ethnographic observation. Decades of controversies and refinements among social scientists should caution theologians about neatly applying theology, even a “biblical” theology, to interactively rich and historically complex circumstances. This concern regarding the application of ideology to social conditions was most famously argued by sociologist Karl Mannheim (1936) and, more recently, by Nicholas Healy (2000:36) who, persuasively, wrote about “blueprint ecclesiologies,” describing the Christian church as “dependent for their normative force upon agreement regarding the fundamental starting point” based on abstract theological notions of “what the church should ideally become.”

Some academic theologians argue that privileging their idealized frameworks is not only permissible but imperative. Some strongly advocate a form of theological absolutism (for example, Milbank 1989; see Martí 2016a, 2023). Interrogating a researcher’s imposed theology on observable phenomena involves

asking what the researcher interpretively lays over the empirical observations of a people or place. This examination of theologically-directed description also includes the potential mishandling of social scientific theory to make conceptual notions fit a preferred theology. Essentially, to become sensitized about how one's theology may intrude when conducting ethnographic research, it is imperative to self-reflect: What might the researcher impose conceptually, both knowingly and unknowingly, as a theological framework in making sense of empirical observations? Presenting this question directs attention to awareness of the researcher's own theological beliefs, objections, and orientations (even if ambiguously held), and the ways social scientific insights can bend observations to lend support to that theology.

Theological work is most often built on profound notions of metaphysical importance. However, metaphysical statements and reflections tend to be continually self-affirming, often within a dense network of other metaphysical statements and corresponding societal institutions, which make them analytically weak when applying them to concrete social situations. Dependence on metaphysical statements can result in creating assertions about incompatible things since imputing metaphysical dynamics to empirical observations involves interpretation above and beyond the scope of what is actually observed. Rich theological concepts such as "love," "suffering," and "communion" (and so many others) are so broad as to be invariably present in nearly all observable settings; however, the ubiquity that accompanies these abstract notions ultimately fails to explain observed phenomena. Thus, while metaphysical considerations often constitute the starting point of theology, the reflexive use of ethnography to accomplish theological work should prompt caution when metaphysical reflections are permeating, vague, and continually self-affirming.

Relatedly, it is not unusual for theologians to leverage empirical observations to advance personally valued convictions. As a sociologist who has listened to theologians draw on ethnographic data to advance their ideas, I understand that their theological convictions are hard won and take on immense personal significance. Nevertheless, I also find that theologians will fall back on previously established convictions when they lack exposure to concepts that more adequately reveal the unobtrusive workings of social structures. Absent the theoretical sophistication or exposure to a wider breadth of analytical resources to articulate the distinctive mechanisms that channel human behavior, this deficiency among dedicated theologians translates into inadequate instruction of their students.

It is worth noting that contemporary social scientific theories emerged alongside the inescapable structures that shape our lives, including complex organizations, financialization, mass communication and transportation, pluralism, racialized political power, urbanization, and more. Contemporary social theories were crafted to cope with vast changes—unforeseen transformations in modern societies largely taking shape in the early 1800s. The conceptual resources developed over the last 200 years are varied, dense, provocative, contradictory, and ever-evolving. In contrast, many fundamental notions in theology developed before these profound shifts and amidst other priorities, especially in the protection of competing orthodoxies; therefore, they simply fail to explain current social behavior. While mastering social theory is difficult, the value of this immense resource is acceded when researchers grasp that these concepts are geared entirely toward the uncovering of uniquely contemporary sociality. Theologians would do well to take advantage of the considerable range of options available today that are continuing to grow.

Correspondingly, the depth with which academic theologians substantively engage with the history and development of their disciplinary theological notions contrasts with the all-too-often shallow use of ideas

drawn from social sciences. Despite the admirable work of scholars like Don S. Browning, Johannes van der Ven, and James Fowler (who each exemplified nuanced understandings of social scientific thought), and contemporary scholarship by Luke Bretherton, Rachel Green, Pete Ward (and others whose work continues to develop), more theologians should at least acknowledge that the universe of sociological/anthropological/psychological concepts is far broader than theologians typically have the patience to learn. Superficial engagement yields to the temptation to use just enough social scientific thought as a vehicle for legitimating theological convictions. Rather than haphazard argumentation, picking-and-choosing insights based on an almost accidental exposure to social scientific ideas, students, pastors, and theologians should be urged to remember that conceptually guided ethnography serves to sharpen our observations so as to pay attention to realities that we would otherwise ignore (Blumer 1931; Hammersley 1989). Scholars in the social sciences are trained to be highly aware of the ideas they draw on. They take into account the development and assumptions behind their ideas as they make observations and are forthright with the utilization of their ideas in drawing out empirical patterns. Because the empirical world is multi-layered and ultimately unfathomable, social scientists at their best draw on the self-conscious use of multiple concepts and often contradictory theoretical perspectives to yield new insights that push beyond already familiar conclusions (O'Brien 2009; Vaisey 2019). Ethnographically inclined theologians can be expected to do the same.

Another caution is concerned with the attraction to idealized case studies. Students and scholars—from novice researchers to advanced faculty members—often want to “do an ethnography” of a people or place considered to be exemplary. By conducting ethnographic analysis, they hope to uncover the secret formula that allows these sites to produce ideal outcomes. As attractive as such projects might be, such efforts always involve the investigator pushing forward front-loaded assumptions to accentuate the anticipated activities and motives of a particular site. However, ethnographers only enter the field with a guess as to what they think might be going on. The actual happenings, the structuring of circumstances, and the mechanisms that propel behaviors among a people or place remain unknown without systematic observation.

The most productive work of ethnography involves a rigorous process of observation that yields revealing dynamics that may not be readily acknowledged or would otherwise remain hidden. Students, pastors, and theologians who begin with an upfront admiration of a site (often with a “best practices” type of question) inevitably stumble on the backstage conflicts, tensions, and struggles that exist everywhere. Without the expectation of such hidden (and at times intentionally concealed) complications, a focus on “best practices” will lead to superficial analysis. Indeed, religious leaders and members may tout their particular community as an ideal site to researchers, although admittedly as participants who depend on haphazard observations, they simply do not have the expertise to properly assess what is truly happening. Leaders who grant access rely on the investigator to affirm a set of biases and then, essentially, “advertise” the superlative nature of their ministry. Basing *entrée* to a field site, based on a front-loaded assumption of being ideal, pressures investigators to craft positive, affirming, and even inspirational accounts. In actuality, systematic observation nearly always reveals innumerable problems, inconsistencies, and outright failures.

Finally, entry to an idealized site based on “best practices” is often done without the effort to properly compare to other cases. Comparison is what yields insights, not the supposition based on an analytically casual basis already pre-determined to be “best.” At a minimum, ethnographers are cautioned to avoid promising positive reports that fail to truly reveal underlying dynamics. Does this mean ethnography is

only productive if it is negative? Not at all, =but our value systems should not prejudge what we should discover. A simplistic sanctioning of incomplete and anecdotal impressions will not serve anyone's purposes; instead, focus on uncovering processes operating in unexpected ways that allow intriguing findings and productive feedback.

Potential Ethnographic Focus for Theologians

The ethics of rigor involves first and foremost the accurate description of people and their setting, constantly affirming the saliency of context. Therefore, the focus on uncovering “found theologies” rather than asserting “imposed theologies” implies the ethics of faithfully reporting the context as found, not the imaginary situation one supposed or wanted. Taking into account the challenges of ethnographic theology described above, what may be attractive as a theological system can cripple the ability to perceive clearly, especially when theological systems so determine what is expected leaving no capacity for surprise. Perhaps the greatest challenge for any ethnography involves the incessant confrontation with empirical complexity. Theological schemas are inherently ambitious, making them inadequate as tools for discerning localized, concrete, and unanticipated phenomena. As investigators seek to isolate empirical patterns over the course of observations, close attention to context will reveal complications. And as those complications multiply, researchers can succumb to desperation in an effort to reduce growing complexity.

I have heard theologians assert that “theology” can be found in every place and circumstance, as if a singular spiritual insight is always and everywhere present, just needing someone to draw it out. In a certain manner of speaking, I agree, and my use of the phrase “found theology” is intended to affirm the reality that theology—usually multiple “theologies”—can be revealed to exist in any social situation. The articulation of those theologies can constitute a research agenda in and of itself: What theology(ies) can be discovered in any particular place and among particular people? To rephrase, to investigate a site's found theology is to ask what the field reveals empirically regarding the theology found in that place.

In my own ethnographic work (e.g., Martí 2005, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2018; Martí and Emerson 2013; Martí and Ganiel 2014; Mulder and Martí 2020), the most theologically explicit people I find are those who occupy specific roles of religious leadership. Yet their theologically-oriented dialogue is almost always embedded within what I label “vision language.” Religious leaders use vision language (which includes stories, terms, metaphors, slogans, doctrinal statements, and so on) to state what they *want* to believe about the church, ministry group, school, etc. Yet, upon careful investigation, I see how often they miss out on *what is actually happening*. A key aspect of “vision language” involves the social management of group orthodoxy (see Brophy 2016). The first step of revealing found theologies is to be wary of the idealized perceptions promoted by leaders at the site. The vision language of religious leaders posits an idealized vision of what they think should be occurring. Some speculate that leaders use this as a way to inspire people, others note that leaders typically are kept from unsavory knowledge, while still others claim that leaders simply ignore what fails to confirm to their idealized view. However “true” such theological statements may appear, researchers should pay close attention to vision language without necessarily accepting the resulting narrative as accurate descriptions. (The utility of analyzing vision language can be

illustrated through the examination of the megachurch ministry of Robert H. Schuller found in Mulder and Marti 2020).

Religious leaders are not the only ones who use vision language. Regular participants do as well. We know that members of a religious community (whether coherent or ambiguous) take on institutionalized understandings to represent themselves and co-sustain a shared symbolic world with others. Indeed, a routine structuring of social life is evident when people who share a setting (whether organizational or situational) adopt a shared language for talking about their group's common life and work (Eastman 1985). I label institutionalized understandings that are recognizable and form a semi-coherent whole as "spiritual packages." My term "spiritual packages" is a conceptual improvisation on "stocks of knowledge" as described by key phenomenological theorists in sociology like Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, and Alfred Schutz, who describe the acquisition and use of readymade "stocks of knowledge" as central to everyday life. Becoming an accepted and legitimated "insider" to religious groups is often dependent on an individual gaining mastery of such spiritual packages. As individuals join, these understandings are adopted, mimicked, and put into practice.¹ Such understandings are instilled both formally (formal teaching, preaching, and/or indoctrination) and informally (observation, conversation, and immersion in a setting). Researchers need not be concerned to selectively "listen" only for theologically-explicit language and exclude the rest, and everyday dialogue as a form of practice may be particularly relevant.² Careful analysis is required since leaders and members are likely not aware of the implicit theology(ies) of a site. Most importantly, it is crucial to remember that merely being a member of a religious group does not mean that the member understands the group—especially with respect to an investigator's research agenda.³

A further analytical stance toward found theology is to examine the relationship between theology(ies) and the actual behavior of a people or a group. Some may assume that a theology "must" impact social behavior, yet it is just as likely that theological belief, objection, or orientation *may not* affect action. Sociologists have a long history of articulating the ways belief and behavior are not aligned (or are often ironically aligned),⁴ and their conclusions often confuse those who continue to assert a simple correspondence between, for example, forcefully asserted theological convictions and observed actions.⁵ The relationship between "belief" and "action" is supremely complicated and non-obvious. For example, the Thomas Theorem famously states, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (see Merton 1995). The surprising implications of this seemingly simple statement are far reaching; here, it suffices to say that meaningful action can result from shared realities—although most often such actions are accompanied by unintended outcomes (Merton 1936). Another example comes from the investigations stimulated by postcolonial and decolonial theory, which take seriously the unseen workings of historical and racialized social structures (Young 2001; Susa 2018). One of the key tenets among postcolonial and decolonial theorists is how power and privilege obscures the "real" structures that affect the social and economic lives of women and non-white groups (e.g., Gandhi 1993; Dussel 2013). Postcolonial and decolonial theory forces us to move past what people "say" in order to focus on the unseen institutional channeling that guide what people actually "do."

Going further in the productive use of suspicion, another analytical stance involves examining religious practices apart from religious talk. Religious practices (especially rituals) are often surrounded with religious language. Take baptism, for example. Every Christian orientation has a theological stance on the practice of baptism, and the actual act of baptism is often accompanied by religious talk. However,

ethnographic analysis of baptism reveals that the act of baptism often involves non-religious motivations and explanations. I have known people who have been baptized to get married, others to please their parents, and yet others as part of getting a “new start” in life. Being re-baptized is not uncommon; being baptized in two or more religious traditions is also not uncommon (noted in Martí and Ganiel 2014). In short, while an investigator may find an explicit theological presentation of baptism to be accessible, research into the underlying or “hidden theology(ies)” of baptism may be more difficult and require a different type of ethnographic observation. A diligent researcher will not allow mere “talk” to obstruct from revealing more fundamental theological realities at work. The methodological principle here is to look at what people do more so than what people say.

Finally, ethnography is an ethically oriented method that usefully interrogates power. Its utility for agendas within contemporary theology is readily seen in the work of many scholars. The importance of her work and so many others is found in a host of new theological schemas, including Womanism, Black liberation theology, Indigenous and Native theology, Mujerista theology, Minjung theology, Asian liberation theologies, Latinx liberation theologies, Queer theologies, Eco-feminist theologies, and others that are still being developed. Even more, a more discerning understanding of the workings of more mainstream theological currents—the understanding of the manner in which “theology” can shape institutional priorities and affect organizational identity and oppositional shifts that can occur between entities—can be crucial for grasping the longer historical development of Christianity apart from the intentions of embedded participants (see Gardner and Martí Forthcoming). The ethnographic focus remains on discovery, yet the emphasis is directed toward discerning mechanisms of power that perpetuate systems of inequality. Ethnographic efforts that draw attention to marginalized experiences and populations and uncover reproductive engines of privilege will lead to an application of the ethics of ethnography that heightens its broader political implications. By seeing how “spiritual” and “secular” structures are co-constructed, ethnographers articulate found theologies that have been obscured by theologies that have been imposed on situations by experts, practitioners, and naïve followers. Newfound clarity can bring healing and a fresh connection to God.

Ethnography as a Welcome Innovation

The recent expansion of ethnography for developing pastoral and theological insights is an unexpected yet welcome innovation. The use of ethnography is especially exciting for students and scholars who seek to root themselves in contemporary, real world happenings. Not only do our theology(ies) not fall from heaven, but they are inherently social and invariably draw on personal and cultural resources and constraints (Mathews 1912). When employing ethnography as a method of observation, it is necessary to interrogate our normative presumptions (Kaufman 2015). Learning to exercise ethnography as a scrupulous methodology helps ensure that particularistic slants will not obscure the unexpected, counterintuitive, and potentially disturbing empirical patterns that are likely to be revealed. Reflexive consideration of one’s own assumptions will more likely deter imposing theology(ies) on systematic observations to be found in any setting.

Certainly, this form of theological inquiry encourages re-thinking and re-visioning. As Wigg-Stevenson (2015) stated, ethnographic theological is a methodology that “intentionally opens theology up for constant revision,” that theology is “a complex cultural practice,” and that in the activity of the researcher it reminds us that “all theological creativity is thus shaped by an ongoing interplay of action and reflection, practice and theory.” In the practice of theology amidst ethnographic exercise, we see more forthrightly how the work of theologizing does not take place in the mind alone or infused into individuals directly by the Spirit without mediation. Theologizing is a human activity, one that requires deliberate formulation and, therefore, can be deliberately re-formulated in response to new events and new encounters. Moreover, when we welcome rather than shun interdisciplinarity as part of the work of ethnography, incorporating the expansiveness of both theological and social scientific disciplines, ethnographic theology better equips researchers to be prepared for inevitable social change. Ultimately, by further substantiating the ethics of ethnographic practice among theologians, students and scholars will accentuate the integrity of findings and produce streams of scholarship that will foster the unexpected and urgently needed theologies of the future.

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