Theology on the Ground

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Any exploration of theologically engaged anthropology ought to begin with a clear definition of what is meant by theology. Most simply, we could say that theology is a system or set of ideas about the divine; theology is what people think about God and how they ought to relate to him. This definition is quite broad, and one might want to qualify it with a connection, if not to the academic discipline of theology, then at least to the work of religious specialists. In order for theology to be different from something more general such as cosmology, it seems to require a certain kind of expertise or access to a particular intellectual tradition. While I see the reasoning behind such claims, I want to argue against such a narrowing impulse by providing a broad view of Christian theology “on the ground.” This democratizing approach enables me to treat theology as an ethnographic object and, by extension, as the basis for anthropological analysis. This, in turn, allows me to address one of the most vexing problems in the anthropology of Christianity, namely how to write about divine action in a way that preserves the integrity of both our informants’ experiences and that of anthropological frameworks.¹

In the discussion that follows, I approach theology as a particular kind of reflexive action aimed at understanding who God is, how he works in the world, how people ought to relate to God, and what they can expect from him. This reflexive work is, as I have already suggested, as ably done by church leaders and scholars as it is by ordinary laypeople, although in this chapter I focus more on the efforts of pastors than I do on the members of their congregations. In the Protestant tradition, theology so defined has historically meant engagement with the biblical text, and in the Pentecostal case that I examine here, we will see that this type of textual engagement takes on a very

particular form. To wit, Pentecostal theology involves creating analogies with the narratives of Scripture, reaching forward and backward across history in a process of infinite recursion that collapses Pentecostal time into an expansive, magical present. Analogy, and metaphor more generally, have been a central concern in both theology and anthropology and, as such, represent a helpful point of cross-pollination between the two disciplines.

My definition of theology as a wide-reaching, democratic project has been forged in a particular ethnographic context. The Zambian Copperbelt, where I have worked since 2003, is a collection of mining towns that has long been central to anthropological analyses of urbanization, social change, and religion. I have carried out most of my fieldwork on the Copperbelt in a township that I call Nsofu, a middle-class community with a population of roughly 25,000 people, located on the outskirts of the city of Kitwe. A great deal of my time in this neighborhood has been spent in small, locally initiated Pentecostal churches, as well as in informal prayer groups and in the homes of Pentecostal believers. Pentecostalism is one of the most democratic forms of Christianity, structured by the biblical promise that the Spirit will be poured out on “all flesh.”² While believers on the Copperbelt place a good deal of stock in the teachings of their leaders, we will see that these are by no means taken as binding. Indeed, there is a great deal of debate in Pentecostal churches, and the work of theology—of understanding how God works in the world and how people ought to relate to him—is shared out among all Pentecostals. This egalitarian impulse has unquestionably shaped my commitment to a democratic definition of theology, though in the conclusion I will show that there are significant intellectual reasons for this definition as well.

Having clarified what I mean by theology, I can now address what it means to study theology “on the ground,” as I have put it—that is, what it means to study theology ethnographically. I propose that we begin with a distinction between theology as something people have and theology as something people do, or, building on discussions of value that I have developed elsewhere, between theology as a noun and theology as a verb.³ While both of these aspects of theology lend themselves to ethnography, in this chapter I have chosen to focus on theology as a verb for two reasons. First is the simple fact that I find this emphasis more satisfying; it is far more interesting to examine those spaces in which people are actively engaged in theological work than it is to ask them to give their particular take on a theological problem. Second, and more importantly, my ultimate aim in this chapter, as in similar contributions in this volume,⁴ is to think with theology as an ethnographic category so as to

² Joel 2:28.
⁴ For example, Fenella Cannell, Chapter 14, #–#; Joseph Webster, Chapter 18, #–#.
better use it analytically. Doing so requires us first to explore the practice of Pentecostal theology on the Copperbelt in greater detail.

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The central practice through which Pentecostals on the Copperbelt do theology is the sermon. Paradigmatically, preaching is the task of church leaders, but Pentecostal laypeople do a lot of preaching too, not just in formal settings such as church services, where they offer testimonies or words of encouragement, but informally as well. Copperbelt Pentecostals preach to each other in the course of conversation, perhaps prompted by a Christian television program, reflection on a recent church service, or a friend’s description of his or her problems.⁵ The work of theology as demonstrated in preaching, then, is shared among the majority of Pentecostals, both leaders and laypeople alike.

When I arrived in Nsofu for the first time in February 2008, the members of Higher Calling, a Pentecostal prayer-gathering-turned-church, were meeting in a small chapel they had constructed from wooden offcuts over a foundation of poured cement. Narrow benches were lined up on either side of the room facing a raised dais, which had been decorated with large plastic buckets full of wildflowers. Half a dozen mismatched curtain panels hung over the rough wooden walls. When I initially began to attend meetings at Higher Calling, the chapel was bursting at the seams, thanks primarily to the popularity of the group’s founder, a young mother whom I call Bana Mfuwe.⁶ In April 2008 Bana Mfuwe moved with her family to South Africa where her husband had been offered a job. Before her departure Bana Mfuwe appointed Bana Chilomba, a middle-aged widow who lived in a small house in an adjacent township, to take her place. Bana Chilomba lacked the charisma of her predecessor, and in the wake of Bana Mfuwe’s departure, attendance at Higher Calling declined rapidly. As the church wrestled with the difficulties brought on by a drop in membership, the Copperbelt was also feeling the worst effects of the 2008 global financial crisis. As the price of copper plummeted and the value of the Zambian currency fell, workers were laid off in droves and small-scale trading ground to a halt.

One rainy Wednesday in January 2009, Bana Chilomba stood up in front of Higher Calling’s remaining members to preach. The group had assembled in the sitting room of a lay believer on account of the chapel’s leaky roof, and I was wedged into the corner of an overstuffed, but surprisingly hard, green sofa. Bana Chilomba began her message by reading the story of Jesus and his first followers, she said, it was time for the members of Higher Calling to cross over from


⁶ The feminine prefix Bana can be used to indicate a teknonym or as a Bemba analogue to Mrs, as in this case. The names of all people and congregations used here are pseudonyms.
where they were to the other side. Building on this initial observation, Bana Chilomba went on to make a number of related points, drawn from a series of biblical texts. She first turned to the Old Testament account of the budding of Aaron’s staff, which had signaled the election of the tribe of Levi for the priesthood. What this passage demonstrated, Bana Chilomba explained, was that God made a distinction among people; therefore, the way that crossing over happened in one person’s life may be different from the way it happened in another’s. Believers should therefore not allow themselves to be distracted by their friends, particularly those who did not show a serious commitment to Pentecostal practice. Bana Chilomba’s next point was that sin could keep people from crossing over. Here she drew on the example of the Israelites, some of whom were not permitted to enter the Promised Land.

As Bana Chilomba went on, she continued to employ the Exodus account, reading out loud the passage in which Pharaoh offered to allow the Hebrew slaves to go out to the desert to worship if they would only leave their possessions behind. Moses rejected this offer, saying that they needed their animals and belongings with them to use in worship. Building on this story, Bana Chilomba observed that some believers tried to cross over without their possessions, that is, they thought they could have a breakthrough, as Pentecostals describe it, without giving to the work of the church. Like Moses, Bana Chilomba rejected this approach, highlighting the prosperity gospel principle that through giving believers produced an obligation in God to pour out a return blessing. To illustrate this point, she recalled the example of Abraham’s generosity and the blessing that followed. Bana Chilomba concluded her message by reading a passage that was very popular in Copperbelt Pentecostal groups around that time: Moses’s promise to the Israelites that they would never again see the Egyptians who had them trapped against the Red Sea. In the same way, proclaimed Bana Chilomba, those who stood strong in their faith would never again see the problems they were facing at that moment.

Before analyzing Bana Chilomba’s message, I want to provide a brief example of a sermon offered by a layperson in order to demonstrate that the theological method employed by church leaders such as Bana Chilomba is common among all Copperbelt believers.⁷ One evening, just as it was getting dark, I stopped in to see my neighbor, a sometime Pentecostal woman named Bana Veronica, who lived with her two young children in the back room of a local private school. Bana Veronica acted as the building’s caretaker in exchange for her lodging, matriculation of her children in the school, and,

⁷ A quick caveat—in Nsöfu, the line between laypeople and church leaders can be blurry. There is a general expectation that prominent and devout church members are on their way to the pastorate, and the democratic thrust of Pentecostal theology means that church leadership structures are always potentially subject to reorganization. Naomi Haynes, “Egalitarianism and Hierarchy in Copperbelt Religious Practice: On the Social Work of Pentecostal Ritual,” Religion 45/2 (January 14, 2015): 273–92, doi:10.1080/0048721X.2014.992106.
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I assumed, some small wages. Her husband lived and worked on a farm outside the city. Bana Veronica had been having trouble fulfilling her work duties as an injury to her arm made sweeping and polishing the floors difficult. I knew that she had gone to see a doctor and had dropped by to ask what the results of the visit had been. I could see that her arm was very swollen, and a quick glance at the X-ray film Bana Veronica had carried back from the hospital revealed that her shoulder was dislocated. Rather than realign the joint, the doctor had merely given her a prescription for painkillers, and Bana Veronica was trying to cope as best she could. While we were visiting, Bana Veronica and I were joined by two young Pentecostal women, Esther and Mavis, who were on their way to an overnight prayer meeting. Upon seeing the X-rays, Esther delivered a short sermon to Bana Veronica. The prophet Ezekiel had spoken to a valley full of dry bones, Esther began, and when he did so they had come together to form an army. In the same way, she concluded, Bana Veronica should pray for herself, lay her hand on her own shoulder, and speak to her bones so that they would come together.

In the sermons delivered by Bana Chilomba and by Esther, we have the core of Copperbelt Pentecostal theology as a verb. Although, as we will see, the way that these women approached and used Scripture reflects patterns found among Pentecostals in other parts of the world, I want to argue that something particular is going on in the Zambian case. Through their engagement with the biblical text, my informants are seeking to expand their present by mapping their experience onto the experience of biblical history. This requires a bit of explanation.

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While there are many similarities in how Pentecostal believers and other conservative Protestants engage the Bible, there are also important points of contrast. These differences are helpfully demonstrated by James Bielo’s analysis of a Lutheran Bible study group with one Pentecostal member, a “non-denom brother” who took it upon himself to challenge the interpretive strategies of the rest of the group. For this lone Pentecostal participant, the Bible was “a book of promises,” guaranteeing such things as prosperity and healing. In contrast, Bielo writes that the remaining members of the group were more cautious in claiming specific biblical promises for themselves. As a result, while the Pentecostal in the group had no problem inserting himself directly into the text, other readers were mindful of the distance between their lives and the biblical narrative. In Bielo’s treatment, the difference in how Pentecostals and other Protestants use Scripture therefore boils down to a difference in the perceived continuity of experience with the characters presented in the Bible.⁸

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Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong takes up a similar line of analysis in situating Pentecostals alongside other readers of Scripture. Because the experience of contemporary Pentecostal believers is defined by the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit through signs and wonders, he argues, they are easily able to identify with the experiences of the early church. The result is what Yong calls a “‘this is that!’ hermeneutic which sees the ‘this’ of the present connecting with the ‘that’ of [especially] the apostolic life . . . and vice versa.” ⁹ Elsewhere, Yong has highlighted the particular importance of Luke–Acts for Pentecostals, arguing that the narrative of Jesus and the Apostles has “served somewhat as a template allowing readers to enter into the world of the early church.” ¹⁰

Writing about Nigerian Pentecostalism, Ruth Marshall calls this way of doing theology “the history of the present.” In her words, the experiential proximity of the biblical narrative brings the Bible’s “principal protagonists into the everyday lives of converts, such that an imaginary dialogue may be established with these figures from a distant time and place.” ¹¹ This tendency to bring the Bible close is, I would argue, at the heart of the classic Pentecostal preference for narrative over didactic portions of Scripture. ¹² Because Pentecostals connect to the Bible on the basis of common experience, it is no surprise that those portions of the text that relate human experience in narrative form would be those in which believers would take the most interest.

Building on these discussions, we can now begin to explore in more detail how Pentecostals such as Bana Chilomba do theology. As Marshall describes it, this task involves tacking back and forth across the arc of history, bringing the principal protagonists of Scripture into daily life so that believers speak as familiarly of St Peter or King David as they do of their relatives or neighbors. ¹³ As Yong points out, this process also works in the opposite direction; just as the common experience of the Holy Spirit can usher characters out of the Bible and into the present, it can also insert believers into the biblical narrative. ¹⁴ It is a particular version of this move to locate one’s experience in Scripture that I want to emphasize in my discussion of Copperbelt Pentecostal theology.

An example from Key of David, another Pentecostal church in Nsofu, neatly demonstrates the process I am after here. Each January the leaders of

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⁹ Amos Yong, In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 89.
¹³ Marshall, Political Spiritualities, 89.
¹⁴ Yong, The Spirit Poured Out, 27.
this congregation choose a theme for the New Year, which is grounded in a key text. This theme is printed out on a colorful banner and hung at the front of the sanctuary (see Figure 15.1). Banners from previous years are also displayed. Each banner is phrased in the form of a proclamation, for example, “2014, My Season of Blessing and Enlargement, 1 Chronicles 4:9,”¹⁵ and “2012, My Season of Distinction and Rest, Exodus 33: 14–16.”¹⁶ These verses give accounts of Jabez and Moses, respectively, but in mobilizing these narratives in their annual theme, members of Key of David have framed them in the first person; 2012 is my season of distinction and rest, not Moses’s. Through this process of identification with biblical characters, believers come to stand for those characters in their recorded biographies. In effect, believers become these biblical figures by taking their places in the narratives of their lives, that is, in the experiences that give them a particular identity.¹⁷

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¹⁵ “Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, ‘I gave birth to him in pain.’”

¹⁶ “The Lord replied, ‘My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’ Then Moses said to him, ‘If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?’”

Pentecostal theology therefore short-circuits history by expanding the present. There is a subtle but important difference in the way that my informants on the Copperbelt make this happen. Yong is clear in his description of the “This is that!” hermeneutic that what connects believers across space and time is the actual experience of the Holy Spirit. In his treatment, what has already happened to Pentecostals brings them to a point of personal identification with the narrative of Scripture, especially that of Luke–Acts.¹⁸ In contrast to this retrospective recognition, when Copperbelt believers seek to locate themselves in the narrative of Scripture, they do so prospectively. Their aim in situating themselves in the stories of the Bible, in taking the place of Moses or Jabez or Ezekiel or Abraham, is to obtain the same results that these people did. Pentecostals on the Copperbelt are therefore not so much recognizing their experience in the biblical text as they are trying to transform their experience into that which is recorded in the Bible. Rather than a “This is that!” hermeneutic, then, we might say that for my informants theology is a matter of “Let this be that!”¹⁹

As a side note, I should point out here that the “Let this be that!” hermeneutic may explain why my informants are so focused on the Old Testament narrative, rather than the Luke–Acts account that is so central to the lives of Western Pentecostals. In the Old Testament, God relates to his people through a series of covenantal promises in which blessing is guaranteed to follow obedience. The framework of covenant is central to the teachings of the prosperity gospel,²⁰ and is a key component of my informants’ religious lives.²¹ Many, though not all, believers on the Copperbelt are concerned with finding ways to relate to God that will compel him to act on their behalf, which explains the emphasis on covenantal language.

Pentecostal theology can therefore be said to work by analogy, by the assimilation of one “complex of objects” to another.²² Here we find a definition of theology that echoes one put forward by David Tracy: “[an attempt] to correlate certain specified meanings and truths in our common human experience and language with the interpreted meanings and truths of a specific

¹⁸ Here a few examples from my own charismatic upbringing illustrate the point quite nicely. My parents, Jesus Movement converts to Christianity, listened to music by a group called the “Second Chapter of Acts,” attended a congregation called “New Testament Church,” and put me to bed at night with a cassette recording of the book of Acts.
religious tradition.”²³ From an anthropological perspective, there is a clear parallel between theology thus defined and magic,²⁴ including divination²⁵ and sorcery.²⁶ In all of these cases, analogy (or metaphor, of which analogy is an example) is described as the key to ritual efficacy.²⁷ Through analogy, “two objects are seen as having resemblances and differences, and an attempt is made to transfer the desirable quality of one to the other which is in a defective state.”²⁸ In the Copperbelt Pentecostal case, believers’ lives are thought to be in a defective state: Their finances need a dose of prosperity; their bones need healing. By teasing apart the causal relationships presented in the biblical narrative—prayer leads to healing, giving leads to blessing—Copperbelt Pentecostals seek to (re)produce the results obtained by people in Scripture by aligning the elements of their lives according to the same chain of events. One puts oneself in Ezekiel’s position to get what Ezekiel got. This theological process, like Pentecostal speech more generally,²⁹ is performative, “[calling] those things which do not exist as though they did,” as St Paul writes.³⁰

The theological work of analogy has important social effects. “Imaginative flights of reference” that cast a woman with an injured shoulder as the prophet Ezekiel or a mine foreman as Jabez “[form] and [transform] their understandings and experiences of the domains they [inhabit],….changing their world fundamentally and irrevocably.”³¹ The primary way that this is accomplished is by moving “inchoate subjects into an optimum position in quality space” through metaphors of “adornment or disparagement.”³² The theological analogies through which believers engage the biblical text position them on the side of victory and cast others as their enemies. In other words, through analogy, different members of the Copperbelt community are positioned inside, outside, or on the wrong side of the biblical narrative.³³ A final ethnographic example will demonstrate this process more fully.

³⁰ Romans 4:17.
³¹ West, Ethnographic Sorcery, 63.
Pastor Kangwa was a young preacher appointed to oversee a tiny congregation that church leaders from Nsofu had “planted” just outside the city of Kitwe. In July of that year, under a thick curtain of dry-season dust, members of Pastor Kangwa’s infant church traveled to Nsofu in the back of an open-topped Canter truck to spend three days with the “mother” congregation for a conference. They carried bedrolls and mattresses so that they could sleep in the church, a temporary structure similar to the one used by Higher Calling, with wooden benches and a few bare light bulbs swinging precariously from the rafters.

The final day of the conference was a Sunday, and during the morning service Pastor Kangwa took the pulpit, clad in a khaki-colored suit, orange dress shirt, and tie. His message was entitled “A Mixed Multitude,” a phrase he took from Exodus 12. Pastor Kangwa began his sermon by reading from this chapter: “Then the children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children. A mixed multitude went up with them also, and flocks and herds—a great deal of livestock. And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they had brought out of Egypt; for it was not leavened, because they were driven out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared provisions for themselves.”

The “mixed multitude” that went out from slavery in Egypt, Pastor Kangwa began, referred to the presence of ethnically mixed people among the Israelites. After 430 years in slavery, the Israelites and the surrounding people would have intermarried, he explained, and as a result Egyptians would have made their homes in the midst of Israel. These “unstable, double-minded” individuals, Pastor Kangwa said, drawing on James 1:8, caused problems for Moses—the opposition to his leadership at the Red Sea, for instance, and the construction of the golden calf while he was on top of Mount Sinai. Such people, he added, had ungodly appetites. Here Pastor Kangwa asked the congregation to turn to Numbers 11:5, which records complaints about the manna God had provided and a desire instead for the foods of Egypt: fish, leeks, cucumbers, garlic, and melons. Pastor Kangwa described such complaints this way:

These people had a real problem. God has provided them with bread from heaven, which had a very wonderful taste, which had all the nutrients. And whenever they ate manna, these people would seem to become more healthy. But they got to a place where they began to say, “We are tired of this menu because we remember the fish in Egypt, we remember the cucumbers, we remember the leeks, we remember the onions.” Can you look at this kind of menu? What can come out of this diet? The onion, the garlic, the watermelons, the cucumbers, plus the fish, eaten together. Can you imagine how you would feel

in the stomach? These people had a weird appetite. God has given them fresh bread, but they still long for the very bad appetite.

The climax of Pastor Kangwa’s sermon came with the declaration that those present were also a mixed multitude and that among them were people with strange, even perverse appetites, including those who would sleep with married men. The church’s Moses had grown tired of what Pastor Kangwa referred to as murmuring, and it was time to repent and be faithful or else suffer the diseases of Egypt. As Pastor Kangwa preached, the back of his suit jacket grew damp with sweat while the huge loudspeakers brought in for the conference sent his voice reverberating across the township. At one point a woman marched from the back of the church and slipped some money into his pocket, a mark of appreciation used on the Copperbelt for skilled dancers and powerful preachers alike. She was not the only one who approved of Pastor Kangwa’s message. After the service I walked home with Bana Mercy, a long-time member of Freedom Bible Church and an important informant in my later fieldwork. As we walked across an unpaved road drifted over with fine red dust, Bana Mercy told me that in her estimation the congregation had people who fit the description of the double-minded individuals that Pastor Kangwa offered. For instance, one woman had attended the Sunday service despite the fact that, as Bana Mercy put it, she was still “living in the world.”

In this example, Pastor Kangwa employed the familiar Pentecostal theological process of analogy in order to position himself and his listeners in quality space. On the surface church members appeared to be one body. They had all come to worship that morning, just as they had all sung and danced enthusiastically during the praise and worship time. Nevertheless, the analogical work of Pastor Kangwa’s sermon made this apparently united group into a “mixed multitude.” As the congregation was brought into the Exodus story, the preacher and his fellow church leaders became Moses, the faithful became the children of Israel, and those who caused problems became Egyptians, people of strange appetites who murmured against those in charge. Through this process, Pastor Kangwa effectively issued a warning to those who found themselves on the wrong side of the story. The Exodus account is already written, and the fate of those who murmur is sealed: Egyptians would get the diseases Egyptians got, while the true Israelites would enter the Promised Land. In this way, Pastor Kangwa’s sermon mobilized the familiar paradigm of expected blessing and, by extension, expected curse—“Let this be that!”—as he positioned himself and the members of his church on different sides of a biblical story in the expansive Pentecostal present.

Although Bana Mercy’s response to this sermon suggests that the significance of Pastor Kangwa’s analogical work was clear in the minds of those who heard it, the narrative he created nevertheless presented some ambiguity,
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and therefore some flexibility. While Pastor Kangwa had plainly positioned himself and the other members of the church leadership in the role of Moses, and while he had said in no uncertain terms that the congregation contained both Israelites and Egyptians, just who fell into which group was never specified. This ambiguity is always, albeit to varying degrees, a feature of Pentecostal theology as I have defined it here. Although some aspects of the Pentecostal expansive present are fixed, namely the causal and logical relationships revealed in the biblical narrative, what happens on the other side of the analogical equation, so to speak, is a matter of debate. One person’s Egyptian is another person’s Israelite.

As noted in the introduction, the particular characteristics of Copperbelt Pentecostalism make it an especially fertile ground for this sort of theological contestation. To return to a point made previously, because the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is, by definition, available to anyone, all believers, whether leaders or laypeople, have the capacity to do theology, to find in the narrative of Scripture read at home or discussed with friends analogies between their experience and those of people in the Bible. These analogic relationships do not need to be established by pastors and might even be different from the analogies created by a particular church leader. A second factor is the number of pastors, prophets, and preachers vying for attention on the Copperbelt. This crowded religious playing field opens space for interpretive variation. Although the process of doing theology by analogy is consistent among the dozens of Copperbelt Pentecostal groups I have visited over the years, the particular analogical relationships—who and what fit where in a given story—are subject to a wide range of variation even among religious specialists.

It is easy to interpret this contested analogical work as a kind of group politics, as believers jockey for positions within Pentecostal groups and draw boundaries within and around their congregations. An argument along these lines would be in very good company. As Courtney Handman has recently pointed out, there is a tendency in the social scientific study of Christianity to view conflicts such as schism (Handman’s particular topic of interest) as nothing more than the sort of political struggle one might find in any social setting. According to Handman, this approach is mistaken. Relational fractures in churches are not like relational fractures in other social groups, she argues, because churches are not like other social groups. The reason for this difference is that churches are sites of religious mediation, mechanisms that help Christians connect with God. This is certainly true in the Copperbelt

I should also acknowledge the particular open-endedness of the sermon as a communicative genre, since this further contributes to the contested nature of analogic theology. To borrow a truism from media studies, the reception of a message will be as diverse as its audience, and the performative work of Pentecostal sermons will necessarily meet with a range of responses.

Courtney Handman, Critical Christianity: Translation and Denominational Conflict in Papua New Guinea (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014). See also Courtney

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case. For Pentecostals in Nsouf, theology provides a conduit for divine action, channeling the power of God to intervene in the world and bring about the transformations for which they are hoping. This last point returns us to the broader aims of a theologically engaged anthropology.

In Chapter 1 of this volume, J. Derrick Lemons argues that “anthropologists must engage with theology to deepen and expand the scholarship of the anthropology of religion.”³⁷ This charge is important. Broadly speaking, while theologians have had little trouble in adopting the tools and insights of anthropology,³⁸ anthropologists have had more difficulty incorporating theology into their work. One of the main reasons is that, as Timothy Jenkins points out in his chapter of this volume,³⁹ anthropology struggles to create space for the divine agency that is implicit in theological models. It is frankly difficult for anthropologists, whose methodological atheism is effectively axiomatic, to write God into the equation, and when confronted with this problem, most anthropologists simply “[conjure] away” the divine.⁴⁰

There are several reasons why the inability to write God into anthropological analysis is a bad thing. To focus exclusively on Christianity for a moment, an atheistic model of religious life does not accurately represent the experiences of our informants. In the words of a South African Zionist, “There is one enormous omission throughout the whole history that has been written by outsiders. The work of the Holy Spirit throughout our history has simply been left out.”⁴¹ Similar critiques have come from within the framework of anthropology. As Jon Bialecki has recently noted, “To ignore God as an agent in the world is not just to ignore or belittle the beliefs of many of our informants, but to overlook an often vital mode of their engagement with the world.”⁴² This omission often leads to reductivism, the very erasure of religion that the anthropology of Christianity initially set out to address.⁴³ Still, the problem remains how anthropologists can write about the experience of


³⁷ J. Derrick Lemons, Chapter 1, #.
³⁸ For an excellent, recent example, see Michael Banner, The Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology, and the Imagination of the Human (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
³⁹ Jenkins, Chapter 6, #–#.
⁴⁰ Ibid., #.
Christians without destabilizing their own experiences. How, in other words, can they “find sense in the worldviews of others without rendering their own views of the world nonsensical?”

Here is where theology on the ground becomes especially important. In the framework I have developed, God’s action in the world figures not as part of an a priori theistic commitment on the part of the ethnographer, but rather as the result of the analogical efforts of my informants. God’s agency, in other words, is part of the theological process under study and is therefore accessible to anthropological analysis in a way that academic theological concepts may not be. When theology is understood as a result of the critical work of people who are trying to understand God and, at least in the Pentecostal case, to make him act, we are able to write about God anthropologically because we can write about him ethnographically. True, in this framework we cannot treat God as more than an element of the theological process, but importantly, we cannot treat him as less than that either. Theology on the ground therefore gives us a way to include divine action in anthropological analysis by grounding it in ethnography.

In this chapter, I have argued for a definition of theology that is democratic and far-reaching, situated in the reflexive work of, in this case, all Pentecostals as they explore and debate how God is working in the world and, by extension, who God is and what he is like. In so doing, my aim has been to develop an ethnographic view of theology that allows us to represent more fully the worlds of our religious informants by including God in the anthropological models developed through engagement with those worlds. While this is not the only way to develop a theologically engaged anthropology, it is of vital importance to this overall project, a crucial step in opening up anthropological discussion to theological categories, most importantly the category of the divine. By treating theology as an ethnographic object in these terms, we are better able to apply it to anthropological analysis.

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45 Cf. Bialecki, “Does God Exist in Methodological Atheism?”