

Theological Ethnography: Embodied

Timothy K. Snyder

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Over the past several decades, theologians have turned to new methodologies to better understand how cultural situations shape lived faith and, in particular, the church. While these new methodologies have their origins in the social sciences, their adoption by theologians has both complicated and constructed new theological thinking for contemporary ecclesiology. This essay traces the “ethnographic” turn in contemporary ecclesiology and then summarizes several key themes in the growing scholarly literature to show how this timely turn could bridge the gap between academic theology and lived experience of actual churches.

The Turn to Culture

As early as the nineteenth century, theologians have been concerned with what we call the historical particularity of Christianity.¹ That is, that all theology must be spoken from *somewhere*, and that entails a cultural specificity of a given time and place. There is no theological view from *nowhere*. But beginning in the mid-twentieth century, these questions began to take on a more prominent and systematic treatment. For example, consider H. Richard Niebuhr’s five-fold typology in *Christ and Culture*, followed just a few years later by Paul Tillich’s *Theology of Culture*. These two books represent only a foretaste of the turn to culture that would take place in the latter part of the century. Shortly thereafter, the Second Vatican Council brought new attention to the modern world and made sweeping changes for both Catholic theology and practice.² Additionally, liberation theologians took cultural particularity as a primary source for critique and constructive theological reflection.

Along the way, theologians in the twentieth century began turning to insights from social theory and cultural studies instead of relying on the more traditional marriage between theology and philosophy. Yale theologian Kathryn Tanner laid out a reorientation for theology in her seminal work *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, which traces modern and postmodern concepts of culture before arguing that theology itself is a cultural practice. Tanner, along with Delwin Brown and Sheila Greeve Davaney, brought together an impressive array of scholars in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis*

and Criticism to further develop a more generative relationship between theology and culture and to show how theology also intervenes in cultural settings: slave theology from everyday culture (Dwight Hopkins), African American cultural memory and theology (Anthony Pinn), the theological and political among labor unions at an Ivy League university (Serene Jones), among others.

The turn to culture in academic theology has recovered its incarnational, or embodied, nature, which has at times been obscured by the abstract and universalizing tendencies of theological reflection in the post-Enlightenment era. Most of all, it reintroduced a creative tension between the particular and the universal in theological reflection.

The Turn to Practice

A second, related turn in academic theology began around the 1980s: the turn to practice. When theology sought after philosophy as its primary conversation partner, it is no surprise that much of theological inquiry focused on systematic and philosophic accounts of beliefs. However, when theologians converged on culture, as it were, they initiated a newfound emphasis on both religious and social practices. These patterned actions ranged from the formal rituals of the liturgy to the practices of everyday life, such as child rearing and relating with people of other races.

Ted Smith has quite helpfully pointed out that when theologians invoke the concept of practice, they do not do so with a unified voice. Instead, they do so by drawing on various theoretical underpinnings and while working toward a variety of ends.³ The concept of practice therefore represents not a single theory but rather a constellation of intellectual moves that has collectively shifted the attention away from the more narrow approaches toward contemporary faith, approaches that tend to emphasize the role of belief systems.

Nowhere has this turn been more developed than in practical theology. Once relegated to the arts of ministry, practical theology experienced a renaissance in the 1980s. University of Chicago theologian Don Browning, for example, developed a systematic proposal for theology to engage social analysis using the kind of thick descriptions of cultural situations that were common in the social sciences.⁴ Other theologians challenged the long-held epistemological arrangements within theological education;⁵ these arrangements prioritized professional clergy (at the expense of the laity) and imagined a strong divide between theory—read *systematic theology*—and its application in other areas, such as preaching, education, and

spiritual formation. On the other side of this turn, theologians began to think critically about the dynamic relationship between faith and action.

The Turn to Ethnography

These turns represent an organic series of developments in contemporary theology that have moved academic theologians closer to the on-the-ground experiences of everyday Christians. The late Ana Maria Isasi-Diaz was a master at placing the voices of ordinary people at the center of her theological work. Recognizing the marginalization of Hispanic women, she turned to ethnographic methods, particularly the group interviews recorded in *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church*, to make a space for their voices to be heard. Her group interviews were themselves sites of and performances of liberative praxis.⁶ While other theologians before her had used the methods developed in the social sciences—such as qualitative research methods as participant observation, the study of historical documents, and interviews—Isasi-Diaz was among the first to argue that the methodology was itself *theological* as it provided a way for her to access other modes of “knowing God truly,” to borrow that splendid phrase from David Kelsey.⁷ Yet despite Isasi-Diaz’s pioneer work (on many fronts), it would take over a decade before theological ethnography would emerge as a leading discussion within theological research.⁸

Beginning in the early 2000s, a growing number of young scholars began to embrace ethnographic methods as a way of grounding their theological work in concrete, lived experience and in embodied ways of knowing. Unlike Isasi-Diaz, these scholars explicitly put forth their work as part of the contested relationship between theology and the social sciences. While theologians such as John Milbank and Stanley Hauerwas were quite critical of borrowing from the social sciences for fear that theology would lose its particular character, this new generation of scholars took confronted these critiques with intellectual rigor.⁹ These younger scholars believe that theologians cannot easily ignore the learning in their bodies and that adopting ways of seeing that were originally developed in the social sciences will not necessitate surrendering the theological character of their work. They also note that much of the rhetoric against the theological use of the social sciences is a defensive response to theology’s abdication of the throne as the “queen of the sciences.”¹⁰

Conversations on ethnography and theology were particularly significant in the Society of Christian Ethics from 2003 to 2007. Those conversations eventually led to the first major attempt to articulate the relationship between the two, published as *Ethnography as Christian Theology and*

Ethics. In the prolegomena, editors Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen develop both theoretical and theological arguments for theology as ethnography. Rather than simply borrowing from the social sciences, Scharen and Vigen understand ethnographic practice as theological work, much as Isasi-Diaz saw her work in the 1990s. The *imago Dei* and the incarnation provide the editors with a theological imagination for such a call. Why then, they ask, would theologians not develop ways of critically attending to such ways of knowing? The second half of the book offers a diverse group of theologians and ethicists showing the generative possibilities of theological ethnography through case studies.¹¹

Ecclesiology and Ethnography

Dovetailing these conversations were a series of conferences on the topic of ecclesiology and ethnography. After a 2007 conference at Yale Divinity School and a 2008 conference at Oxford University, a collaborative research group soon emerged with the purpose of blurring the lines between empirical and theological analyses of the church. Since then, this group of scholars has hosted annual conferences, launched a well-received book series, and will soon launch a new academic journal.¹² The turn to ethnography represents one of the most important shifts in contemporary theology but not only for academic theologians. This empirical turn is also of utmost significance for the church.

Before theologians began to draw together several decades of experience in fieldwork (the turn to ethnography I described above), Nicholas Healy wrote his underutilized *Church, World, and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*. There, Healy critiqued the tendency of contemporary ecclesiology to frame its discourse through singular images, metaphors, or models. These “blueprint ecclesiologies,” as Healy calls them, tend to drift toward abstract, overly systematized, and idealistic accounts of the church. Instead, he proposed a turn to the particular, the concrete—what he eventually calls *ecclesiological* ethnography. Though Healy himself never heads out into the field to conduct ethnographic research, his proposal for a distinctly *theological* ethnography has become a key set of arguments for researchers those who have.

The research group that emerged from the Yale Conference on ethnography recently published their programmatic proposal for ecclesiological ethnography. In *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, Pete Ward (editor) opens with a simple but important critique of what he calls a “methodological laziness in ecclesiology.”¹³ Ward goes on to unveil the common practice among theologians to take great care when we approach

our philosophical and historical sources but to let our sense of rigor fall to the wayside when it comes to social, cultural, and empirical sources. Ward writes, “When we talk about the contemporary church . . . it becomes acceptable to make assertions where there is no evidence. We assume a common perception of contemporary church life between author and reader. We base whole arguments on anecdote and the selective treatment of experience. We are prone to a sleight of hand that makes social theory appear to be a description of social reality—which it of course is not.”¹⁴ The book then attempts to correct this practice.

The book begins with a four-chapter proposal that argues for an essential compatibility between ecclesiology’s deductive mode of inquiry and ethnography’s inductive mode. The authors of these chapters are careful to argue that when theologians take on the practices of ethnography they do not give up their essential vocation *as theologians*. As John Swinton suggests, theological ethnography is a *sanctified* ethnography—not that is purified but that it is “set aside for a specific purpose”.¹⁵ The second part of the book then engages the reader in a multifaceted and dynamic conversation at the intersection of ecclesiology and ethnography. Some authors raise critical questions from their own experience in the field, whereas others anticipate incoming theological and epistemological critiques. Collectively, the volume advocates for a renewed relationship between the church and those who spend their lives studying it.

In a follow-up volume, *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, the reader finds a more sustained conversation on the relationship between ethnography and theological inquiry. This volume contributes to emerging debates regarding normativity and interests in contemporary theology. In particular, many of the contributors do not see any inherent conflict between the two—what counts as either theology or ethnography is contested. The book continues with explorations of the ways in which liturgy sits at the intersection of church and society. If *Perspectives* began a new conversation among theologians engaging in the ethnographic study of the church, then *Explorations* extends the conversation into other areas of theological inquiry and begins to question the limits of the field of academic theology itself. It is a disruptive book. Time and again it shows that when theologians turn to ethnographic fieldwork, there is real potential that the wisdom and embodied knowledge of everyday Christians, and the communities they belong to, will resist, revise, and renew conventional theological formulas and agendas. Moreover, the theologians themselves are changed. Good ethnographers do not exit the field unscathed.

Perhaps no one has been as self-reflective in this regard as Duke theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson. In her ethnographic study—published as *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*—Fulkerson sought to better understand a multiracial Methodist congregation in North Carolina. Instead, she discovered a veiled and implicit racism and ableism that ran deep in the embodied practices of their congregational life. *Places of Redemption* attempts to theologically interpret such a situation, one that begins “at the scene of a wound,” as she names it. In *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, Fulkerson reflects even deeper on her own surprising discomfort being the only white woman in the room and not knowing what to do with her own body around those whose bodies are arranged quite differently. This “self reflexivity,” as ethnographers speak of it, is a critical part of the research process but such careful attention to social location and emotional, spiritual, and theological interests are all too often ignored in conventional theological methodologies.

John Swinton, a leading voice in this conversation, has long wondered why it is that when some contemporary theologians, such as Stanley Hauerwas, speak of the church it sounds so wonderful, and yet, at the same time, it makes little sense when put in the context of the lived experience of actual congregations.¹⁶ Ethnographic research has the potential to disrupt our conventional theological patterns and to close the gap between what we say about the church and how we live as the church.

Bridging the Gap

If it is not already apparent, allow me to suggest this as explicitly as possible: the turn to ethnography among theologians is good news for the church. Academic theologians have for too long preferred to begin with the universal claims of the Christian tradition. We have preferred to stay in the abstract, especially when it comes to issues of unity, diversity, and identity. That may have worked well enough in the settled cultural forms of Christendom, but those days are over.¹⁷ When theologians turn to the particular, to a granular attentiveness to the complex actualities of local ecclesial situations, they are invited to renew their concrete commitment to a way of doing theology that serves the church and God’s ongoing redemptive work in the world.

Such a shift serves both congregations and religious leaders alike. As Mary McClintock Fulkerson has written, “To learn to expect divergence, contradiction and multiplicity in communal faith is crucial for constructive ministry.”¹⁸ No longer can seminaries and divinity schools place such primacy on the kind of knowledge that is constructed in isolated library

cubicles and confined to the printed page. In these unsettled times, it is crucial that we develop ways of seeing and hearing that grant access to alternative modes of knowledge, to the embodied and material nature of lived faith. Everyday Christians, and the communities they belong to, have untapped reservoirs of theological wisdom. They know much about God and, at times, they are not even aware how vital their embodied knowledge really is.

As these developments have progressed, several questions and issues have emerged. For example, in what way is ethnographic research properly theological? Is it enough to simply appeal to situations in which the empirical is theological (e.g., instances of racism and ableism)? As theologians draw upon the theological voices and practices of faith communities as sources for their own theological reflection, how do they balance thick descriptions with claims and judgments about such evidence? These rather methodological questions point to many of the ethical, epistemological, and spiritual challenges associated with grounding our ecclesial theologians in the concrete life of the church. Taking such questions seriously offers us the possibility that contemporary ecclesiology might better serve the church and its ministries. For those of us who yearn for a new partnership between academic theology and the church, the current turn to ethnography in the study of the church is, perhaps, the most promising development in contemporary ecclesiology. It is a challenging time to be the church in the West: pluralism and modernity have challenged old lines of authority, a history of colonization demands robust practices of humility, some churches are experiencing massive declines while others are growing at exponential rates, and the list could go on. This new partnership between academic theology and lived theology is only beginning, but given the challenges the contemporary Western church faces, the timing could not be better.

1. See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), 62.
2. Robert J. Screiter, "The Impact of Vatican II," in *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 199), 158–72.
3. See Smith, "Theories of Practice," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

4. See Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology?: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991). “Thick description” is a phrase employed by Clifford Geertz in his essay “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30. Geertz explains that he adopted the term from philosopher Gilbert Ryle, specifically from his lecture “What is *le Penseur* doing?”

5. For example, Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice?: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002); and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “The ‘Clerical Paradigm’: A Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness?” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 11 (2007).

6. Uses of the term *praxis* vary much like uses of the term *practice*. Within liberation theologies, the emphasis on *praxis* usually points to a dynamic process of action and reflection, most often directed toward a systemic social problem such as poverty, racism, or sexism.

7. See David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What’s Theological about a Theological School* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992).

8. Isasi-Diaz made these arguments in various unpublished notes, essays, and correspondences with her thesis readers at Union Theological Seminary. Special thanks to the Archives at Burke Theological Library at Union Theological Seminary (Columbia University Libraries) and especially to Betty Bolden and Ruth Tonkiss Cameron for their assistance with the Ana Maria Isasi-Diaz Collection. For more, see “Papers, MDiv Thesis and PhD Dissertation” in Series 3, Box 4, of that collection. Research at Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University was provided by a Coolidge Fellowship: a collaboration of *CrossCurrents*/The Association of Religion and Intellectual Life, and Auburn Theological Seminary.

9. For example, see Christian B. Scharen, “‘Judicious Narratives’, or Ethnography as Ecclesiology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58, no. 2 (2005): 125–42.

10. This phrase, “queen of the sciences,” is a reference from the medieval ages to the founding of the university. Like other disciplines (medicine, law, theology, and philosophy were among the earliest), theology was often referred to in this way.

11. This volume was the focus of a recent roundtable discussion published by *Practical Matters*, a journal published by Emory University. Those articles can be found at http://practicalmattersjournal.org/issue_toc/6.

12. This group of scholars is now organized as the Ecclesiology and Ethnography Research Group. For more, visit <http://ecclesiologyandethnography.wordpress.com/>.

13. Ward, ed., *Perspectives in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 4.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 89.

16. Remarks made at the 2012 American Academy of Religion (AAR) in Chicago, IL. The AAR session featured several contributors to *Perspectives in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* along with two responders. Swinton makes a less colorful version of this claim in the opening lines of his chapter in the same book.

17. I am well aware that the effects of Christendom linger, though they linger in disparate ways depending on social location and geography among other factors. The point I am trying to make here is a more limited one: the shifting role of Christianity in Western society is, if nothing else, unsettled.

18. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography," *Ecclesial Practice* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2014).