The conversation in these pages is one marker of the growing interest in and practice of theological ethnography. Use of social science in theology and ethics is now a well-worn if contested path for academic research and writing. The noted “cultural turn” in theology raised the profile of the social sciences and social theory as preferred disciplinary partners to the level formerly occupied solely by philosophy.¹ Our work moves beyond this more traditional position to a more novel one: ethnography as theology and ethics. That is, we argue, that the practice of attending to situations, viewing these situations as embodying substantive theological/ethical claims, and the nature of the substantive theological/ethical claims themselves are constitutive of theological/ethical work.

Despite the attractiveness of these developments to many, and perhaps because of them, critical questions have arisen. Our colleagues in this issue of Practical Matters, as well as Mark Douglas’s fine review in Practical Matters Issue 5, have raised a great many important questions arising from their reading of EACTE. Ted Smith, in his review essay in this volume, generously argues that the book “clarifies the questions at stake in such a way that it opens into new conversations.” Of the many critical questions emerging from these essays, we want to lift up three to respond specifically

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¹ The cultural turn in theology refers to the shift in the late 20th century toward a more interdisciplinary approach that incorporates insights from anthropology, sociology, and other social sciences. This movement aimed at enriching theological analysis by engaging with the social contexts of religious practice.
to as beginnings of such ‘new conversations’ about theological ethnography.

First, important questions encircling the notions of particularity, reflexivity, and the possibility of making normative claims recur throughout these thoughtful pieces. Douglas crisply summarizes the numerous tensions that must be deftly balanced when taking up an ethnographic method: “…between a researcher being reflexively attentive and being self-absorbed; between objective and subjective methodological concerns; between gathering and interpreting data; between generalizable and contextually-specific discoveries....” Indeed, these are key challenges every researcher necessarily confronts. Failing to attend to them (or attending poorly to them) can greatly diminish the rigor and usefulness of the project. It is all too easy to collapse the tension and land flat-footedly on one or the other side of any of these dialectics. The key is to hold them in dynamic tension—to resist reaching a static or permanent resolution to any of them, but instead to “keep all the plates spinning,” as it were. In other words, the less researchers try to resolve the tensions and the more they live in them, the better for the nuance of the work and for the attentiveness to complexity.

For example, one of the pernicious dangers that Douglas, McClintock Fulkerson, and Reimer-Barry all point to is the temptation to romanticize research subjects and collaborators, which consequently sacrifices more honest, three dimensional depictions. Indeed, doing so might very well sell more books (akin to popular “unauthorized biographies” that often trade in complex stories and facts for tawdry ones). What those committed to doing careful ethnography will invariably encounter is the reality that even when there is strong common identity and experience, the members of any given or identified community often express very different experiences and interpretations. Moreover, even grouping people as a “community” can seem like an external and artificial artifice created for the researcher’s conceptual convenience. It can be too easy to force thematic coherence where there may be very little—to create congruence where there is incongruence.

On the other hand, as Douglas and McClintock Fulkerson also aptly perceive, the researcher might err on the side of too much caution and timidity—in the name of respect and reflexivity—and resist claiming as much expertise, knowledge, or normative authority as he/she ought. Douglas is again instructive. He asks, in a sense, what it means when ethnographers make respecting the dignity of research subjects the first priority in situations where the subjects deny this dignity for themselves and the people they mock and harass (in his example, English soccer hooligans, but one can extrapolate and imagine even more threatening others—e.g., warlords and impressionable youth trained to be guerrillas, perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence, white supremacists). Indeed, in such cases, truth might be that which runs wholly counter to what informants profess or perceive.

In response to such concerns, it is worth underscoring the point made in several places in our book that “bearing witness” does not equate with—or validate as “Truth”—every/any-thing that informants tell ethnographers. Numerous qualitative anthropology and sociology texts are instructive in this regard; they offer a “thick description” without endorsing it per se. Indeed, ethnographic descriptions can be both “thick” and also critical. McClintock Fulkerson makes this
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point in her attempts to describe the realities of racism and ableism in the congregation she studied through the bodily dispositions and language she observed. For us, the aim is to create as nuanced a narrative and picture as possible—one that reveals the fullness of humanity (malformed as it may be)—an instructive glimpse into its brokenness, passion, hope, fear, ache, and grit as embodied in a particular context. The original ethnographies (e.g., Browning, Jones, Reimer-Barry, Whitmore) that constitute Part Two of our book are concrete examples of this kind of arduous groping toward messy, multi-dimensional truths. Yet none offers a risk-free or “guaranteed fool-proof” strategy for avoiding problematic missteps. Tangible and foreboding risks—of getting the story or picture wrong, of doing the research poorly, of collapsing the complexity into easily digested superficial tropes—are all very real. There is no getting around it. And part of responsible ethnography is being as methodologically aware and transparent about these risks as possible. In so many respects, a researcher who attempts to study, or learn from, a person or people to whom he/she is a relative stranger or outsider necessarily faces the risk of claiming either too much or too little knowledge with respect to what the subject(s) think, know, feel, and perceive. In light of this reality, what we most hope to offer at this juncture is the encouragement to live dynamically in the tension rather than to try to resolve it.

In a second question, alluded to above, Douglas wonders about the role of researcher expertise. When might the ethnographer possess much needed skills and insight that could benefit the research subjects? In other words, is there an appropriate place for an ethnographer to move beyond simply learning from her/his collaborators to also attempting to teach them so that, in Douglas’s words, they might “advocate for themselves”? This is a question particularly directed to the discipline of ethics. In the case of Vigen’s original ethnography (Women, Ethics, and Inequality in U.S. Healthcare), she took the approach of devoting significant space and analysis to engaging the insights and knowledge of her research subjects and another, separate space (chapter) to mounting her own ethical arguments for healthcare reform in light of, but not wholly dependent on, or in sync with, the ethnography. In other words, her normative claims incorporated learning from the ethnographic interviews, but also went beyond and outside of them in making a case for structural changes in the way U.S. healthcare is practiced, delivered, and paid for.

Yet, should researchers take the additional step of trying to educate, change, or help advocate for informants? Blanket answers will not be of much use—so much depends on the particular nature of the research topic and endeavor. And there is always the danger of researchers being too quick to try to “fix” problems and people they do not yet fully understand. Yet, some ethnographic methods, like Participatory Action Research (PAR), make this very move and do so with great skill and care. Melissa Browning’s work with Tanzanian women who are HIV positive is illustrative in this regard.

A third question raised by these review essays is put well by Mary McClintock Fulkerson: “How is ethnography properly theological?” Versions of this question arise in other responses, but we’ll pursue McClintock Fulkerson’s framing of it. She rightly notes a key theological theme in
the book: the carnal character of Christian faith implies “study of lived, embodied practice.” Drawing from Manuel Vasquez’s important writing on the material and embodied character of religion, she points out that understanding Christian faith must mean more than abstract ideas. It must tend to “bodily movement, music, chanting, visual icons, and more, essential to church practices.” Describing the depth of embodied practice achieves more than a value-neutral description of reality. As a host of scholars have shown over the past few decades, such a “value-neutral” description is not possible. The “view from nowhere” has been challenged by “views from somewhere.” In the case of “views from somewhere,” description means finding and articulating normative claims embodied in practice. Theological ethnography is, in part, just another form of analysis operating out of value-orientations, notions of the good, and so on. The challenge, however, is to elucidate the theological distinctiveness of using ethnography in this way, that is, to attend to normative claims embodied in practice.

McClintock Fulkerson’s response to this problem, developed briefly in her review essay and more fully elsewhere, basically posits that we only know God indirectly through signs of divine presence and work, through “altered social relations that can be said to testify to Divine Presence.” Use of theological terms alone, or to put it differently, proper God-talk alone, does not entail God. Using a logic of redemption both more subtle and more persuasive than many we’ve read, McClintock Fulkerson sees both the need to apprentice oneself to context such that its particular forms of brokenness and repair can be understood and articulated and also the need to draw upon shared explicit Christian themes in doing so. She admits that this drawing upon these themes is a secondary move, after the first work of “interpreting the situation” using secular lenses to “read” what counts as brokenness and repair. What is theological, finally, is the interpretation of particular brokenness as rooted in sin, a pervasive and interconnected social brokenness, and of particular repair as testimony to a pervasive work of God bringing about social repair.

Ethnography, McClintock Fulkerson rightly notes, can help make theology carnal. Yet we want to push a bit on what she ends up with regarding what is theological in theological ethnography. In her depiction, it seems, the work of interpreting the situation is not theological, but rather involves reaching for theoretical lenses to read the situation as text. Then, as if in an act of theological translation, the interpretation is shown to have a deeper level of meaning—God’s presence and action. That this is really God cannot be proven; God is not actually there, as an object, working repair in front of her eyes. Yet her testimony points to the signs of repair seemingly rooted in the character and actions of the God Christians know in Jesus Christ.

But what if the situation is not a text, and our understanding of the situation comes from the theological act of giving ourselves away in surrender to the situation, becoming apprenticed to it? And what if, further, our apprenticeship to the situation tutors us bodily in the practices entailed in the situation such that we come to experience ourselves some of the brokenness and repair present there? That kind of embodied knowing allows what we mean by “carnal theology” as describing the process of acquiring the fuzzy logic of the particular as a way to inhabit the world.
Todd Whitmore’s chapter in our book, “Whiteness Made Visible,” portrays these two modes of theological ethnography. On the one hand, he gives himself away to the Pabbo Internally Displaced Persons camp in Northern Uganda, and to the Acholi people living there, so that he can understand more fully (while knowing full understanding is not possible) their life and situation. Giving oneself away for the sake of understanding and loving the other is, Whitmore says, a basic task of Christian discipleship. So in that regard, his ethnography is theological in a methodological sense, shall we say, if the term “method” can be employed as entailing substantive concerns and not just “techniques.”

On the other hand, Whitmore’s deep engagement in daily life in Pabbo (for example, washing and bathing Santos with Sister Cecilia, alongside innumerable other aspects of daily life) situate him “not outside or above practice but at its “point of production,” immersing him “as deeply and as durably as possible” into his neighbor’s world. Through this kind of immersion (what Pierre Bourdieu provocatively calls “understanding as a spiritual exercise”), Whitmore comes to understand the brokenness of relationship symbolized in his whiteness; as he says, it “becomes visible.” And because of the patient and painful apprenticeship to the practice of daily life in Pabbo, he also comes to see hope in the mural of the Holy Mother, which he describes in the close of his essay. His very sight has been altered such that he can understand the cry of hope painted into this white Mary with thick hair, a wide nose, and thick lips. Mary becomes not an icon of the brokenness, but of its repair; not another nauseating instance of patronage and power, but of heavenly benediction for the displaced Acholi people.

In order to make this theological point, Whitmore never leaves the context, never steps back to develop “explicitly” theological themes, but rather makes theological sense via his embodied understanding of the Christian sense made in the midst of life with the Acholi. Of course, Whitmore brings his own deep learning and Christian experience to his engagement in the practice of daily life in Pabbo. This informs his listening, living, learning, and, in the end, his understanding. But the fact that his apprenticeship offers this learning only makes it less likely that he’d need an imposition of external theological categories in order to witness to the presence of God repairing the brokenness dramatically impacting nearly every facet of life with the Acholi.

Other excellent questions arise over the course of these fine essays, and we hope to learn from and engage more of them over time. For example, both McClintock Fulkerson and Smith raise a question we think must be addressed more fully: “Could a theological ethnographer ever make judgments that disagree with an informant’s judgments?” Our initial impulse might be to argue that if ethnography is based upon immersion in local settings in order to elicit fine-grained understanding of lived claims of God’s transformative presence, is it not then bad faith to subsequently employ categories external to that setting’s self-understanding for the sake of critical judgment? Yet would not giving up the critical moment simply collapse the theological into the empirical, creating what Ted Smith memorably called “enchanted positivism”? To escape this dilemma, we might explore how to draw critical leverage in norms found embodied in shared practices, includ-
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Scharen/Vigen, *Ethnography Audacious Enough to Witness*

...ing not only the shape of their current practice but engaging “thick histories of practice” among other believers. Rarely are any communal practices idiosyncratic; their own histories in practice, so to speak, contain the seeds of their own critique and reform.

In all, what we are so grateful for is the many ways in which these responses to the book show how the work of reflexivity is ongoing—well beyond the point of any publication of research. Reimer-Barry is refreshingly candid about this fact in her reflections on her recent work with Mexican women and men. Indeed, when academics start to see tangible results for ourselves in terms of publications, invitations to give lectures, tenure, promotion, and sabbaticals, it really makes us think yet again about how our lives are changed by this work even as those of our research collaborators may not be.

But critical reflection needs to happen on all kinds of levels. It involves periodically re-evaluating what we said, what we learned, what we got right, and what we did not. It means thinking about what we will do differently the next time and how to keep ourselves accountable—to the research, to the collaborators, to the academy, even to the church and the society in which we live. At its best, ethnography as Christian theology and ethics is audacious enough to witness to what is most authentically true: to what is and what ought to be in the world.

(Endnotes)

1 Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).


