

**Presences and Absences: Introduction to
*Engaging Religious Experience through Ethnography and Theology***

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Introduction

This *Practical Matters* issue 6 returns to themes that emerged in our Spring 2010 issue, which explored how an interdisciplinary conversation between theologians, anthropologists and scholars of religion contributes to the doing and creating of both ethnography and theology. Taking into account the persistent interest in this conversation over the past three years, reflected both in recent publications and academic conferences, we saw an opportunity to identify and engage ongoing challenges faced by those working at these intersections. In this issue we turn to “experience” as a moment of difference and similarity, a category that resonates in both the ethnographic study of religion and in theology and ethics, as each discipline marks the mysterious depths and dimensions of communal practices as well as human and divine otherness.

The category of religious experience brings into focus the ways that the academic study of religion has, sometimes more successfully than others, attempted to avoid a functionalist approach that would reduce religion to social or cultural processes. Part of this effort is aimed at questions about the distinctiveness of religious studies as a discipline that overlaps with a variety of aca-

demic subject areas and approaches. Yet alongside these anxieties is a real concern with (Western) scholarship's inadequate ability to describe religious experience. The ethnographic turn in the study of religion could be understood as furthering efforts to represent religion as it intersects with social and cultural dynamics while also listening to religious practitioners' own accounts of religious experience. Ethnographic methods allow researchers to access religious experience through the testimonies of informants and through researchers' own witness to the intersubjective and embodied dimensions of religious practice. Ethnography also promisingly supports efforts to bring religious others nearer in all their complexity and particularity, especially those whose alterity might have obscured our vision of them if viewed only from afar. Nonetheless, gaps between the perspectives of the researcher and the perspectives of religious practitioners persist, especially when it comes to accounts of divine presences that researchers may not experience for themselves.

Christian theology and ethics also use the category of experience in conversation with other sources, such as scripture and tradition, as a way to think about divine revelation and human relationships. As in the study of religion, discussions of experience in theology and ethics emerge from and spark anxieties about reducing otherness, both divine and human. On the one hand, theologians and theological ethicists fear the conflation of divine agency with thick descriptions of human activity, as well as a potential inability to render judgment on harmful practices because of an emphasis on the irreducible particularity of experience. On the other hand, theologians also envision, in a turn toward the pluralities of human experiences, practices of description that loosen the hegemonic tendencies of theological norms and prescriptions, which can fail to take into account the complex experiences they would illumine and direct. If both religious experience and theological language might obscure or become idolatrous (to use theological language), what does a turn to experience mean for theological studies, and what role does ethnography play in the study of those who claim to experience divine presence and absence?

As editors, it is our hope that by engaging religious experience through the disciplines of theology and ethnography we can further a conversation not only about the ways a meeting of two disciplines inspires ethical accountability and theological/theoretical creativity but also about the inevitable and irreducible tensions between them. A return to ethnography and theology is not an attempt to advocate for a particular interdisciplinary approach but to better understand what might be uncovered or still yet obscured at the intersection of ethnographic and theological approaches to religious experience.

In past issues, *Practical Matters* has offered a map of current trends in scholarship, a "state of the field" essay in the Features section surveying pressing concerns and moments of inspiration. Issue 6 offers this overview in the form of two roundtable conversations among scholars whose questions emerge from their own experiences of fieldwork and from reflections on their own scholarly methods. The first roundtable, a conversation among ethnographers of religion, begins with a prompt from Robert Orsi, a claim about the vital relationship of fieldwork to the study of religion. The second roundtable includes reflections by Christian theologians and ethicists and uses a recent

edited collection, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, as its starting point. Each roundtable invites an “outsider,” a theologian in the case of the first roundtable and an anthropologist in the case of the second, to offer a response to the conversation as a whole. While we encourage our readers to engage each of these roundtables and the pieces in the Analyzing, Teaching, and Practicing Matters sections individually, we also want to highlight particular themes that weave in and out of the different sections of this issue. Most of the contributions could be read under a number of themes, and placing them within an analytical framework risks reducing the multi-faceted insights of each individual piece to generalities. Still, we hope to open up a conversation between authors and articles that might not otherwise be read together, extending the spirit of a roundtable discussion to encompass this issue in its entirety.

Embodiment as Epistemological and Analytical Resource

One thread that connects each of our sections, from Features to Practicing Matters, is the significance of embodiment in engaging religious experiences. Robert Orsi begins our issue with a compelling argument about how “doing religious studies with your whole body” can move an ethnographer to discover new approaches to describing religious experience and to unsettle familiar theories, in part because of the vulnerabilities and anxieties that embodied interactions entail. Reflecting on his research among survivors of clerical sexual abuse, Orsi suggests that embodied engagement with religious practitioners requires an understanding of religion that takes seriously its distinctiveness and promotes disciplined attention to uniquely religious experiences and interpretations of suffering.

While Orsi’s interlocutors in the first roundtable challenge some of his claims, in the second roundtable, Emily Reimer-Barry illustrates the salience of Orsi’s argument. Reflecting on her fieldwork in a migrant safe house, Reimer-Barry emphasizes the significance of embodiment in her attempts to explore structural violence and agency. She considers the way her body and the bodies of those she interacts with change the kinds of data that shape her ideas and that lend urgency to the experiences she is trying to represent. Likewise, engaging religious experiences with her whole body brings into focus power dynamics that she cannot easily resolve.

Both Orsi and Reimer-Barry highlight the role of embodied interactions and self-reflexive fieldwork in teaching about religious lives and ethical dilemmas. In another piece, explicitly devoted to pedagogy, Harshita Mruthinti Kamath and Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger explain how teaching Indian dance to undergraduates encourages students to explore the epistemological significance of embodied practices, beyond what may be articulated or explicitly stated by religious practitioners. Kamath and Flueckiger explore strategies for helping those unfamiliar with or untrained in Indian classical dance to engage religious experience in a classroom setting and to interpret their movements through both textual and material culture. Finally, Amy McCullough, as both a pastor and an academic, reflects on her study of female preachers’ experiences of their bodies in the pulpit

and describes an analytical turn away from “the body” as an object of study and toward embodiment as an unfolding relation with selves and others. Her comparisons of three women’s divergent choices and relationships to the task of preaching raise compelling questions about what it means for religious practitioners to engage their work with their whole selves.

Writing (Probable and Implausible) Truths through Silences, Fragments and Gaps

Along with the emphasis on the multiplicity and complexity of embodiment, the theme of writing emerges as central to the challenges that both ethnographers and theologians face in representing human and divine lives. For instance, in her response to Orsi, Courtney Bender discusses the difficulty of returning from research for her book *The New Metaphysicals* only to find that traditions of scholarly writing and narrative did not enable her to properly render the truths of her encounters. In describing her own unlikely strategies for solving her writing dilemma, she makes an appeal for greater reflection on the practices and theoretical experiences that shape academic writing. In searching for forms of writing that disrupt the “illusory wholeness” of claims about religion (Orsi), Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger takes up the theme of the vulnerable ethnographer and suggests the inclusion of “fragments” of encounters that might call into question a researcher’s own arguments. She explores strategies for engaging these fragments and the ethical implications of discerning what stories can be shared with readers. She also suggests the importance of an ethnographic narrative style that honors shades of ambiguity and “imaginative possibilities” that direct analysis may not.

Wrestling with the question of theological and theoretical interpretations of experience, a number of authors map different approaches to marking the uncertainties and unknowing of ethnographers and theologians. In responding to *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, Ted Smith considers theology’s interest in the relationship between “the is” and “the ought” and articulates hesitations theologians may have in engaging ethnography. He offers the image of both mourning and working the gap between the descriptive and the normative, the faithful observation and the theological claim, as a way of lifting up the inevitable and fruitful spaces between different modes of interpreting God’s activity and human experience. From an anthropologist’s perspective, João Biehl raises questions about equating ethnography with a theological methodology, although he supports an engagement between ethnography and theology that doesn’t reduce the former to a method or the latter to ethnographic data. In responding to the theology and ethics roundtable, he notes possible dangers of theological language, along with other kinds of discourses of power, in constraining human life and argues for the unique role ethnography plays in investigating experience without a predetermined or anticipated outcome to guide the path of inquiry. Biehl and Smith thus both raise provocative questions about the role of theology’s eschatological lens in interpreting ethnographic observation. In his parallel “outsider” response to the roundtable on ethnography and religion, Mark Jordan reflects on modern literature as a resource for writing elusive

ethnographic truths and then suggests that theology, with its “lessons of contradiction, repetition, unsaying, and silence,” may also contain resources for ethnographers who wish to keep open the interpretive possibilities of telling the truths of religious experience. These reflections on writing reflect the kinds of interdisciplinary imagination that assist both ethnographers and theologians in traversing disciplinary boundaries and representing the religious worlds of those they study.

Shifts and Expansions in Theological Method in the Use of Ethnography

The explicit intersections of the disciplines of ethnography and theology also run through the issue, especially in the instances of theologians who are drawing on ethnography as a resource for broadening the scope of academy theology. By using ethnographies of religious communities by sociologists and anthropologists as an introduction to theology itself, Jeremy Posadas presents theology to his students as emerging from interactions and relationships. This approach highlights the way that theology is a creative process of communities struggling with “issues of great significance” rather than the codifications of these processes in written formulations. Similarly, Mary McClintock Fulkerson’s contribution to the roundtable on *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* also argues that theology is expanded beyond the abstract ideas of the academic theological tradition through the practice of ethnography. For Fulkerson, ethnography allows the theologian to attend to a set of logics in Christian communities without demanding the coherence of systematic and to attend to the theo-centric dimensions of Christian embodied knowledge that might be missed if orthodoxy is the only guide for theologians. Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, in their response to the reception of their *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, push Fulkerson’s reflections even further to insist that the immersive practices of ethnography can, in themselves, constitute theological acts. Like Posadas’s insight that theology exists in the communal processes of particular situations, Scharen and Vigen maintain that the ethnographic situation itself contains theological import and that one need not step back from the ethnographic context in order to craft theological reflection. The practices and engagements of ethnography itself can expand theological vision.

Avoiding Reductions in the Practice of Ethnography in Conversation with Textual and Theological Traditions

As part of the Roundtable on Ethnography and Religion, James Bielo reflects on the challenge of representing religion “without reducing it to some other part of life” in his current fieldwork among young creationists working on designing the Ark Encounter theme park. Bielo draws insights from historians who have elucidated the American Protestant impulse to mix piety and play in order to understand the office context of these religious creative professionals. The task of creat-

ing “religious fun” need not be marked by explicit religious language, in this case, in order to tell us something about religious experience. Likewise, Don Seeman, in his roundtable essay, argues that the “anthropological bias against serious engagement with textual traditions has led to some odd exclusions,” and he reasons that attention to textual and interpretive traditions helps to place traditions in broader translocal and transhistorical contexts. Furthermore, Seeman proposes that engaging traditional theological categories may enable ethnographers to hear what informants say and do not say about their experiences of divine presences and especially of suffering.

Aaron Howard’s piece in *Analyzing Matters* also resonates with Seeman’s acknowledgment of anthropological tendencies to treat religious experience “as a synonym for culture” and with Seeman’s intuition that ethnographers in anthropology are beginning to “treat the god as a real actor in the social drama.” Howard sees a way beyond hegemonic discourses that assume a position of skepticism about supernatural agents in Mary Keller’s “supernatural realism” and in her recourse to theological discourse in describing spirit possession. From the perspective of the anthropology of Judaism, Shlomo Fischer argues that Orthodox Jews do not talk about divine agents in the same way that Christians do, and yet there is “an experience of holiness or experienced holiness” in Orthodox Judaism all the same. Fischer finds evidence of these experiences in the gaps between written theology and ideology and what is spoken about in conversation, and therefore he wonders if direct, personalized experience of the divine in Orthodox Judaism is “a phenomena that can be written about but not spoken.” In a variety of ways, these scholars ask, what does ethnography miss about religious experience if textual and theological traditions are not taken into account?

Activist and Theological Commitments

Ultimately, one of the threads that runs through all of the contributions to this journal issue is a concern to honor the relationships that a researcher builds with communities and individuals in the process of ethnographic work. This is also, perhaps, one of the busiest and more generative spaces of intersection in discussions between anthropologists/religious studies scholars and theologians/ethicists using ethnographic methods. For Christian theologians and ethicists, the commitments to Christian community are intensified and highlighted in the practice of ethnographic scholarship. Natalie Wigg-Stevenson discusses the multiple roles of researcher, minister and friend that she has embodied and the necessity of reflexivity in negotiating these varied commitments in her work as an ethnographer. She raises the question of how a theologian’s reflexivity might differ from that of an anthropologist because of the role a theologian intentionally plays in the transformation of a community’s theologies and practices. Nancy Ammerman’s reflection on her “Observing the Church in the World” course for Master of Divinity students reveals the usefulness of teaching observational methods drawn from ethnography for pastors-in-training. Like the attentiveness to theology as a process taught in Jeremy Posadas’s “Introduction to Theology” course, these students were taught to identify the social and cultural dynamics present in their communities in order

to best serve these communities in a pastoral capacity.

Melissa Browning's reflection of the role of the outsider while facilitating Participatory Action Research (PAR) directly addresses the complexities of research aimed at community transformation. Browning highlights the privilege that researchers have to enter into certain kinds of experiences, but even more importantly, the privilege of leaving issues behind, whether simply in returning home or moving on to different topics. In Susan Dunlap, Mary McClintock Fulkerson, and Marcia Mount Shoop's conversation about theological method, Fulkerson and Shoop are searching for the appropriate theological methods for their book that allow them to attend to the transformation of racism and colorblindness in Christian churches. Their embeddedness in and commitments to Christian communities ultimately fund their use of ethnography and poetics in their theological methods.

Others in this issue pick up the question of what ethnographic research in its written forms does or does not do for the communities with which we work. Todd Whitmore, in a mix of historical, ethnographic and theological lenses, analyzes the role of teaching literacy and the written narratives of tribal history in the Comboni missionaries' collaboration with colonialism in what is now Northern Uganda. Whitmore ends his analysis with a provocation that imagines a contemporary theological ethnographer faced with a similar decision to the one the Combonis faced: to curb their writing or face expulsion. He asks us what we would do if writing the truths of oppression and violence were to cost us our careers. From the perspective of an anthropologist working in Muslim Indonesia, Anna Gade asks how ethnographers might combine the need to write the complex truths of experience with the urgency needed to confront environmental realities. She considers some of the limitations of fieldwork in contributing to understandings of environmental crisis when religious experiences confuse rather than clarify and when there is more data than can be taken into account. Finally, Lynne Gerber reflects on her own experience of writing in a journalistic medium and finding that her commitment to telling the sacred stories of those she studied meant telling stories that countered her own convictions. Not wanting to contribute to the ways that ex-gay conversion narratives are used in anti-gay activism, Gerber sought to strike a balance between honoring the truthfulness of her informants and placing those narratives in historical, political and theological context. Whitmore, Gade, Gerber and many others in this issue bring to the fore the complex and often competing commitments that those of us who conduct ethnographic research must negotiate in writing up our results.

Conclusion

Out of the conversations generated in this issue, we suggest three potentially fruitful points of continuing exploration for those interested in returning again to the intersections of ethnography and theology. First, the shifting relationships of power that ethnographic researchers navigate and participate in will always require researchers to think carefully about the intentional and un-

intentional effects of engaging communities and individuals through fieldwork. Ethnography is a relational enterprise, and as both Gerber and Wigg-Stevenson point out, “engagement” itself can have multiple meanings, often simultaneously. Can making the “engaged” dimensions of our scholarship explicit, however idiosyncratic they are to our individual and communal particularities, help all of us to discern more ethical ways of conducting research? Second, what resources and practices of writing are shaping theology and ethnography, and how might an interdisciplinary conversation contribute to new practices or pedagogical emphases on writing? Biehl suggests not only the importance of fieldwork to writing practices but also the generative possibilities of certain ways of reading texts and the importance of returning again and again to the stories we have told to attend to the unfinished nature of the experiences we tell. Third, ethnography and theology offer unique resources in marking the apophatic dimensions of what a number of our authors have described as transcendence that is horizontal as well as (or rather than) vertical. How might each discipline learn from the other’s tools for this difficult work of describing what remains always beyond the accounts that any one description or language can offer? If Orsi’s proposal that every graduate student in religious studies undertake some fieldwork is taken up more broadly, all three of these issues could be addressed in the training of future researchers into religious experience.

Moreover, we would like to invite readers to continue the conversations in this issue by visiting the “Religion Matters” blog attached to the website of the *Practical Matters* journal. Posts related to the themes surrounding ethnography and theology raised here will appear in the “PM Postscript” section, and feedback on this issue is welcomed there in the comment stream. We hope that readers will find the conversations there and in this issue as lively, challenging and enjoyable as we have found it in our privileged role as issue editors.

Finally, we would like to extend our gratitude to our faculty issue advisors, Don Seeman, Bobbi Patterson and Ted Smith, as well as offering special thanks to Don Seeman and Chris Scharen for their help in gathering such lively conversation partners for our roundtable discussions. Their investment in these conversations among graduate students and in their own work have made this issue of *Practical Matters* possible.