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THE PORCUPINE TANGO: 
WHAT ETHNOGRAPHY CAN AND CANNOT DO FOR 
THEOLOGIANS

by

James V. Spickard


Ethnography and theology are two contrasting life-activities, regulated by separate ideals. Like other sciences, ethnography is regulated by the ideal of ‘truth’. It gathers data about human communities, particularly their worldviews and their tacit social practices. New data correct old conclusions, forcing ethnographers to discard the ideas with which they began their investigations. Following the regulative ideal helps them avoid placing their concerns about those of the people they study. Theologians (and others) can use ethnographic methods to gather data about congregational life, how people practice their religions, etc., but this practice itself is not ‘doing’ theology.

Keywords: ethnography, theology, regulative ideals, science

My title calls to mind the old joke about how two porcupines make love: very carefully. The same should be true of theologians who want to add ethnographic techniques to their intellectual toolkit. It can be done, but it’s not simple. I want to describe some issues that arise from a social-scientist’s perspective. Though editing (and contributing to) Personal Knowledge and Beyond gave me a reputation as a maverick among sociological ethnographers, I share my discipline’s distrust of mixing intentions. Put bluntly, I think you can either investigate social reality or you can theologize about it, but you can’t do both at the same time—at least not while protecting each discipline’s integrity. I thus have a conceptual problem with the “as” in the book title Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics and with that book’s editors’ claim that “ethnography can be more than a mere tool in the doing of theology; it in itself can be an expression of theology.” Such statements fail to recognize that ethnography is a human activity governed by what Kant and Charles Sanders Peirce called “regulative ideals”. Ethnography’s specific ideals prevent it from itself being a form of theologizing. They do not, however, prevent theologians from reflecting on both the results and the process of doing ethnography, for their own ends.

To see why, we have to begin with some basics.

To start, ethnography is a method of gathering data. It is a specific method, with specific attributes. Contra Ward, it is not just “a cluster of values that shape how research is conducted” in any prosaic sense, though it does embody values (as we shall see below). Nor is it a cover term for qualitative methods in general, as some theological writers seem to imagine. Instead, it is a disciplined way of approaching social life in order to grasp certain of its key aspects. It does not typically gather superficial beliefs, identities, or reports of acts from large numbers of people; that is the job of survey research, which does that task very well. Nor does it typically gather reports of people’s raw experiences; that calls for phenomenological interviewing. It does gather people’s beliefs, identities, reports of acts, etc. on a deep level, but it is not interested in them as markers of those people’s individuality. Instead, it is interested in the extent to which they are shared in whatever socio-cultural scene those people inhabit. Ethnography is also interested in those scenes’ hidden social patterns: the things that typically go unremarked but that structure the social lives of people living together.

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To take an example from one of my longer pieces of fieldwork, male activists visiting the Los Angeles Catholic Worker community are typically introduced by their arrest records. “So-and-so was arrested at the Nevada Desert Test Site, did jail time for a School of the Americas blockade, and is charged with pouring blood on missiles in a plowshares action.” Every native knows these introductions. Only an outsider finds this pattern remarkable, but it tells us a lot about how this particular community works.\(^6\)

As a shorthand, we use the cover-term ‘culture’ to describe this combination of deep beliefs, identities and hidden social patterns. Ethnographers no longer reify this term, however. Renato Rosaldo, whose critique of the culture-concept put the last nail in the coffin of seeing culture as something superorganic, famously referred to ethnography as “deep hanging-out”.\(^7\) Ethnographers ‘hang out’ in a cultural setting, watching and asking odd questions, for a long time—traditionally several years. They gradually grasp how the residents of that setting see the world and they gradually learn the behavior patterns that guide those residents’ action in it. No one expects these worldview patterns to be simple. That’s why ethnography takes such a long time.

Three quick points. First, ethnography focuses on people: specifically, on other people. Ethnography is not about us, the ethnographers; it’s about them, the ‘natives’. I do not use this term in the colonial sense, for colonized

people can be ethnographers as well. Eliza McFeely tells the story of We’Wha, a Zuni ethnographer who spent a year doing fieldwork in Washington, D.C. in the late 19th century.\(^8\) Taking on the role of a ‘Zuni princess’, she lived in the house of the American ethnographer Matilda Coxe Stevenson and became the toast of the town. She used her access to the elite to find out how Washington worked. She then reported back to her clan elders, in the hopes that her knowledge would help them keep White folks at bay.

A second quick point follows from the first one: we can only understand other people if we learn to see them as they are, not as we would like or imagine them to be. This is harder than it looks. Ethnographic history is rife with stories of even famous ethnographers who got so caught up in the tale they were telling that they neglected to see what was really happening to the people in front of them. Derek Freeman’s late-century attack on Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* was certainly overdone,\(^9\) but her failure to account for the role of cargo cults in fostering social change in Manus was surely abetted by her acceptance of the then-common notion that traditional societies were static and only modern societies actively embraced transformation.\(^10\) The point is, we have to watch ourselves carefully. To use psychologists’ talk, we have to catch our own projections. That’s probably the hardest part of doing ethnography, but it’s crucial to its success.

The third quick point is about writing: ethnographers tell other people’s stories, not their own. Yes, the articles in the famous collection *Writing Culture* (and its sequels: *Women Writing Culture*, *After Writing Culture*, etc.)\(^11\) rightly talk about the problem of representing other peoples’ realities. We ethnographers have learned to write ourselves into our texts, not because the

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\(^6\) The School of the Americas (renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation in 2000/2001), but often still described as the “School of Assassins”) is a U.S. Army training program for Latin American military officers, many of whom later committed torture, mass murder, and other gross violations of international human rights. “Plowshares actions” involve the invasion of U.S. nuclear facilities to pour blood on nuclear missiles or hammer them into plowshares (Isaiah 2:4). I describe a portion of my fieldwork in James V. Spickard, *Ritual, Symbol, and Experience: Understanding Catholic Worker House Masses.* *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 4 (December 2005): pp. 337-58.


texts are about us but because (among other things) doing so shows our readers how we know what we claim. Writing ourselves into our texts shows readers our standpoints, so they know what we can and cannot see.

There is a further motive. Karen McCarthy Brown described writing herself into her ethnographic biography Mama Lola specifically to convey the cultural patterning of Alourdes’ life more clearly. “Anyone who looks closely will notice that I appear in the text only when there is some difference or misunderstanding that needs explaining.” 12 Ethnographic writing is about conveying other people’s realities to the reader, not about conveying our own.13

This said, we have a problem—one that I think has made ethnography seem exciting for theologians, though perhaps not quite as exciting as some imagine. This is simply the point that the ethnographer always has to have a place to stand. We are not omniscient. We are not omnipresent. Our ability to observe others is based on who we are and what we have experienced, in all its demographic, biographic, and (yes) spiritual peculiarity. No matter how well we know the people in our research setting, we cannot see everything about their lives. Being human, we see only a partial view.

A camera is a very good analogy. A camera has to be located somewhere and pointed in a particular direction to make a picture. Pointing also frames that picture, because no camera has a spherical field of view. Framing inevitably leaves some things out and keeps some things in. Once pointed and framed, however, the camera captures what is really there. It produces an accurate picture of the part of reality that it sees.

In the same way, ethnographers are located in our particular bodies and shaped by our particular social locations. By being human, we are given a position in the social field. This affects what we can see, though we can see that accurately. I, as an older, PhD-holding, White male living in the center of the Empire cannot automatically see the world from the point of view of a young, semi-educated, refugee woman who is fleeing gang violence in her neo-colonized homeland. I can see part of her world, but I cannot see the whole of it unless I find some way to step out of my own skin and into hers. I can try taking an imaginative leap, but such leaps only take us so far. Clifford Geertz pointed out that some cases elude even our wildest imaginations.14 We can, at least, get partway there.

12 Karen McCarthy Brown, "Writing About the Other: Revisited." Pp 127-33 in Spickard et al, Personal Knowledge and Beyond., at p. 132.
13 J. Shawn Landres makes a set of useful distinctions on this score. See his "Being (in) the Field: Defining Ethnography in Southern California and Central Slovakia." Pp 100-12 in Spickard et al, Personal Knowledge and Beyond.

The question, though, is how ethnographers deal with this situation. If we are inevitably rooted in our standpoints, our present understandings, and our skills—and as human beings, we are—how can we actually comprehend other people’s communities? Put otherwise, what makes ethnography as a science possible? For that’s what ethnography is: the science of investigating communities other than our own and reporting about them as accurately as we can.

Two things save us. One of them is a practical rule-of-thumb, the other is deeply theoretical. Both are important.

The rule-of-thumb first: if you aren’t absolutely flabbergasted by what you find, then you’re not doing good ethnography. This ought to be obvious, because surprise is the best way to catch our own projections. Emily Reimer-Barry’s account of her surprise at the theological depth of her conversations in a Tijuana migrant safe house was exactly right: she confronted her own unconscious expectations about whom she was interviewing and she overcame them.15 This let her get the story right—something she would not have been able to do, had she not discarded what she thought she was going to learn. That’s the center of ethnography: getting the story right. To use an old and somewhat provocative language, we ethnographers try to tell the truth about the people with whom we are living. That’s the reason we tell our readers who we are and what we can and cannot see: doing so tells a truer story about our work than leaving such things out.

The theoretical point: ‘truth’ is not something that exists in the real world. It is, for science, a regulative ideal. Immanuel Kant pointed out that some ideas are not demonstrable, but they regulate our activities so as to make those activities possible.16 The pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce showed that the ideal of achieving ‘truth’ makes science possible, by encouraging scientists to engage in continual self-correction.17 Though Jürgen Habermas used Peirce’s model to describe truth-seeking in the natural sciences and a Diltheyan hermeneutic to describe the social-scientific variety, the real difference is the method of confirmation, not the correction process.18 To use Peirce’s somewhat convoluted language: “truth is that concordance of abstract statement with the ideal limit towards which endless

involvement would tend to bring scientific belief.”19 Seeking ethnographic truth is a process of letting one’s field site correct one’s misapprehensions, while simultaneously showing one’s readers the limits of one’s own current knowledge, so that they can (perhaps) see the people we are writing about more clearly than we are able.

Here’s how the process works. We inevitably enter our field sites with preconceived ideas about what we will find there. If we didn’t, why would we have chosen to investigate this place rather than some other? In this sense, Ward is right that “qualitative research is ‘theory driven’”.20 We begin with theories about what we expect will be going on. As we get to know our field site better, though, we find how badly those theories fit the actual situation. We listen, learn, try out our ideas on our informants, listen and learn again, round and round. At some point, we have discarded enough of what we thought we knew to claim some progress.

Here’s an example. Up until about ten years ago, I spent a lot of time doing research among religious social activists.21 I hung out (deeply) with people who had spent much of their lives working for social change. Like most neophytes, I entered the field thinking that these people were somehow special. It’s what I’ve come to call the “What heroes!” image. I imagined that they embraced their religious faiths so strongly that they were certain of their paths. Part of me wished I were as certain as I supposed they were, so that I could dedicate my life as they had seemingly done. Note the conditionals. I soon found out that my informants were no more religiously secure, no more unquestioning, and no more virtuous than I. The difference was that they insisted on living on the edge, where they could give their faith a chance to become real. I had to discard my prior view of them in order to understand them properly.22

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22 I recount this in the second half of James V. Spickard “Slow Journalism?”

Doing this depends on using ‘truth’ as a regulative ideal. Without this ideal, I have no grounds to judge which view is more correct: my previous “what heroes!” response or my later, more nuanced appreciation of my informants’ lives. Correction depends on some things being righter than others. Yet what criteria of rightness should I use? I cannot use a foundational notion of truth, because truth is the end result of scientific investigation and is thus not available a priori. Instead, holding ‘truth’ as an as-yet-unspecifiable ideal allows me to judge. I constantly examine my conclusions to see if new evidence can find them wanting. ‘Truth’ is an eschatological ideal, drawing science forward.

It is also a matter of faith. Scientists—and I specifically include ethnographers—live in faith that we, as a community, will finally understand the world, if only at the end of time through a process of infinite self-correction. That faith will only be realized through the continued existence of a community of scholars, upholding ‘truth’ as the ideal regulating their actions. And it might not work out. That is what a life of faith is all about.

There are other ways to live life. In Max Weber’s famous address on “Politics as a Vocation” we see two others: the ‘ethic of moral conviction’ and the ‘ethic of responsibility’.23 Each of these ideals regulates life in other directions than does science. We cannot prove that science as a way of life is superior. It is either a value choice or a calling, or both, to use other famous Weberian terms.

This is how values enter the ethnographic process. In this sense only, Ward was right that ethnography embraces “a cluster of values that shape how research is conducted”.24 Ethnographers, like all scientists, try to make our accounts more accurate, something that is only possible if we affirm ‘truth’ as an eschatological ideal. We constantly wrestle to understand our own limited visions, so as to be able to surpass them. We try to see from points of view that are strange to us, in the hopes that they will make our accounts more complete.

Theology has different regulative ideals, because it is a different life-activity. As near as I can tell, Christian theology looks for God’s work in the world and in the lives of Christian congregations. Notice the language with which Scharen and Vigen encouraged theologians to take up ethnography in the first place:

We understand ethnography as a process of attentive study of, and learning from, people … in order to understand how they make
meaning … and what they can teach us about reality, truth, beauty, moral responsibility, relationships, and the divine, etc. The aim is to understand what God, human relationships, and the world look like from their perspective. I actually think this is a worthy goal, but it is not an ethnographic one. Contra Scharen and Vigan, ethnography has to allow for the possibility that our interlocutors have nothing to tell us about “reality, truth, beauty, moral responsibility, … etc.” We have to allow for the possibility that God does not look like anything from their perspective. If we cannot do this, then we are not truly listening to our informants. Ethnography’s regulative ideal insists that we do.

This does not mean that theologians cannot or should not engage in empirical research, nor that they should not listen to and learn from ordinary people. It just means that theology and ethnography are two separate life-activities. Doing serious ethnography means that theological reflection happens only after the ethnographic data has rolled in. It is a second-order activity, equally valuable but not the same. Its ideals regulate it differently, and in a different direction.

Pure ethnography can make no predictions about where its inquiry will lead. If we do our jobs well, we cannot, despite T.S. Eliot, “arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” That, I fear, is what those who treat ethnography as theology are trying to do.

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