

Integrating Ecclesiology and Ethnography in Christ

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Criticism of using qualitative methods in practical theology, including the ecclesiology and ethnography movement, has tended to set up a tension between two worlds, one of theology and one of social science. This article demonstrates how the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation in the writings of Paul Fiddes and Dietrich Bonhoeffer can help practical theologians integrate ecclesiology and ethnography in the person of Jesus Christ.

Keywords

Ecclesiology; ethnography; Paul Fiddes; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Trinity; incarnation

Introduction

The ecclesiology and ethnography movement in practical theology has developed in recent decades to address the concern that modern ecclesiology had drifted too much into the abstract and had become too disconnected from the lived reality of the church and its members. This movement has sought to use methods developed in ethnography to observe the experiences of communities and individuals and to create dialogue between those experiences and Christian theology. Some have been concerned that these attempts are tempted to accept a naturalistic world view by making theology contingent on the social-historical. In what follows we will review a history of some of the tension in integrating ethnography into theology and explore how Paul Fiddes and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's use of the doctrine of the Trinity and the incarnation may provide resources for us to work through this tension.

Egyptian Gold

St. Augustine, around the turn of the fifth century C.E., writes,

For, as the Egyptians had not only the idols and heavy burden which the people of Israel hated and fled from, but also vessels and ornaments of gold and silver, and garments, which the same people when going out of Egypt appropriated to themselves, designing them for a better use, not doing this on their own authority,

but by command of God.¹

In this passage Augustine references a long-standing allegorical reading of Israel's exodus from Egypt. At least as early as Origen, Christian theologians had read the story of the Israelites taking gold and other treasure from the Egyptians in the exodus that would later be used to build the tabernacle, and they saw in this story a model for the appropriation of concepts from pagan thought being put to use in Christian theology. There is a long history in Christian theology of recognising and utilising the wisdom of insights and methods developed outside of the church.² Likewise there has always been push-back against using outside wisdom. It is argued that non-Christian writing cannot be integrated with Christian theology as it denies the very premise of the Christian religion: that God has most clearly been made known in God's incarnation in Jesus Christ.

Developments in Practical Theology

The ecclesiology and ethnography movement that has emerged in the last quarter of a century is an attempt at this kind of collaborative theology.³ Eileen Campbell-Reed and Christian Scharen trace this movement to a shift in practical theology that began in the early 1990s. Don Browning began working on a theology that focused on describing lived faith from a hermeneutical perspective. Campbell-Reed and Scharen show how this movement was expanded by the work of Johannes van der Ven in statistical analysis and Hans-Gunter Heimbrock using phenomenology. Elaine Graham and Bonnie Miller-McLemore helped to draw the field's attention to dynamics of power and context in qualitative research.⁴

Still, all of the insights gained in the 1990s largely took for granted research methods drawn from the social sciences and, according to Campbell-Reed and Scharen, it was not until the mid-2000s that practical theologians turned their attention to the question of how qualitative research methods themselves could be transformed in order to be properly theological.⁵ The ecclesiology and ethnography movement seeks to bridge a gap between modern ecclesiology, which is perceived to have become overly

¹ Augustine, 'On Christian Doctrine', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. First Series, Volume Two*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. F. Shaw (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), p. 554.

² David Lyle Jeffrey, 'Egyptian Gold', in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 226.

³ The author similarly summarises the history and contentions of the ecclesiology and ethnography movement in Roger Jasper, 'Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Mind of Christ: How the Baptist Tradition of Discernment Can Serve as a Resource for the Dialogue between Practical Theology and the Social Sciences', *Journal of European Baptist Studies* Vol. 19, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 111-126.

⁴ Eileen R. Campbell-Reed and Christian Batalden Scharen, 'Ethnography on Holy Ground: How Qualitative Interviewing Is Practical Theological Work', *International Journal of Practical Theology* 17, no. 2 (2013): p. 234.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

theoretical and disconnected from the lived realities of Christians, and secular social science, which would regard the church as merely a social or cultural grouping and not as the body of Christ on earth.

To demonstrate this growing dissatisfaction with theoretical and disconnected ecclesiology, John Swinton tells the story of a conference panel discussion he participated in with Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas. The panel of well-known theologians was enthusiastically discussing Hauerwas' writings on persons with disabilities in the Christian community when a deflating question came from the audience. One woman's experience of the church had not been quite so idyllic. She asked, "Where is this community you are talking about? Where is your church?"⁶

Similarly, I was leading a small group in my local Baptist congregation a couple of summers ago discussing James K. A. Smith's book *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. In part of the book Smith argues for the character-forming nature of the traditional Christian liturgy.⁷ During one week's discussion a member of the group finally voiced her frustration with the author's assertions about the liturgy. She said that she had grown up through her entire childhood and adolescence attending Roman Catholic mass regularly. She complained that if these rituals were supposed to be forming her character over all those years, no one had told her about it. To her these rites had been completely disconnected from how she lived outside of the sanctuary. Of course, it may be that she was formed by the mass in ways she has not yet recognised. We may even wonder if she is so active in this Baptist congregation today because of the good that the mass did in her character formation. However, the point is that it is important to hear her story and to let her story speak to our liturgical theologies, even as we hope our liturgical theologies will speak into her story.

Often, in the past, practical theology has taken an applied approach, using the conclusions of more abstract fields like biblical studies, systematic theology, or historical theology, and applying those insights to the practices of ministers and lay Christians, hoping for improved outcomes in those practices. The ecclesiology and ethnography movement uses the qualitative methods of the social scientific field of ethnography to explore the embedded meaning of Christian practices first. It recognises that there is much to learn about faith from the way it is actually lived. Assuming that all of our practices are already value-laden, this approach to practical theology observes and reflects critically and theologically on habits and behaviours in order to gain deeper insights into what theology is already being lived out by

⁶ John Swinton, 'Where Is Your Church? Moving toward a Hospitable and Sanctified Ethnography', in *Perspectives in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 71.

⁷ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).

individuals and communities. These insights can then be brought into a mutual critical dialogue with more formal understandings of Scripture and tradition.

However, integrating ethnography and theology is not without complications. Christian theology claims to be derived from sources revealed by God and the social sciences claim to be empirical. John Swinton and Harriett Mowat, in their book *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, recognise this epistemological tension. They suggest that dialogue between practical theology and qualitative research requires ‘hospitality, conversation, and critical faithfulness’.⁸

Mutual Critical Dialogue

Swinton and Mowat propose a four-stage model of mutual critical conversation. Stage one is a surface level observation of the practice being considered. In Stage two, a more complex understanding of the practice is drawn out through qualitative research methods. Stages three and four constitute the mutual criticisms. First, the practice, understood more deeply through the above methods, is critiqued in light of the Bible and tradition. Finally, the investigation of the practice is able to offer back criticism and recommendations for revised practice.⁹

Swinton and Mowat’s model is a revision of an earlier one put forward by Seward Hiltner and David Tracy. Hiltner and Tracy were themselves developing the thoughts of Paul Tillich. Tillich had proposed that Christian theology should seek to answer from Scripture and tradition those questions asked by reason and experience.¹⁰ Hiltner and Tracy’s criticism of Tillich’s model is that it does not empower experience and reason to critique theology and practice. They insist the process must allow for mutual criticism.¹¹

Whereas Swinton and Mowat largely adopt the mutual critical method proposed by Hiltner and Tracy, they maintain concerns that simple mutuality leaves theology and qualitative research to be considered as equals that must negotiate what is true. Instead, Swinton and Mowat insist that in Christian theology revelation must maintain a ‘logical priority’.¹² So, the tension remains. How can practical theology and qualitative research be integrated in a way that allows for mutual criticism, but maintains the logical priority of information believed to be revealed by God? About Swinton and Mowat’s

⁸ John Swinton and Harriett Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn (London: SCM Press, 2016), p. 86.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-94.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

revised mutual critical method Andrew Root writes, ‘The authors simply assert that hospitality, conversation, and critical faithfulness should frame the dialogue between practical theology and qualitative research, but they fail to articulate how this would be done.’¹³

Logical Priority in Theology

The issue of logical priority is also what concerns John Webster about the ethnography and ecclesiology movement. He writes,

Christian dogmatics does not concede the ontological primacy and self-evidence of the social-historical; and it considers that apprehension of the phenomenal visibility of social-historical realities is not possible in the absence of reference to their ordering to God, that is, in the absence of reference to their creatureliness.¹⁴

To do Christian theology is to recognise that everything observed by the social sciences is part of a creation defined by its relation to a Creator. This relationship and the doctrines that flow from the conviction that this relationship exists are not less real, but more real than what can be observed and analysed by social scientific observation.

Webster especially takes exception to qualitative research meddling in ecclesiology, as he understands the church to be defined foundationally by doctrinal assertions about God. ‘Ecclesiology has its place in the flow of Christian doctrine from teaching about God to teaching about everything else in God.’¹⁵ So, what it means to be the church flows out of the eternal reality of the triune God. The God who exists eternally as a community within God’s own self established a community among God’s people as a reflection of that divine nature. This reality defines how the community understands human life, not *vice versa*. For this reason, Webster believes that you violate the premise of ecclesiology by deferring theological reflection until after the community has undergone social scientific observation.

So, Webster’s core concern is to ensure that in ecclesiology, as in all theological inquiry, the theologian maintains an order of inquiry that reflects the relationship between the Creator and the creation. A study of the social phenomena of the church should not be undertaken without first recognising the church’s origin and purpose in the triune God who created it. To neglect this order would be to allow ecclesiology to become ‘naturalized’.¹⁶ He suggests that those who wish to use ethnography in ecclesiology recognise this order and that the observed phenomenon is only a sign of a deeper reality

¹³ Andrew Root, ‘Practical Theology and Qualitative Research’, *The Journal of Youth Ministry*, 6, no. 2 (2008): p. 114.

¹⁴ John Webster, ‘In the Society of God’: Some Principles of Ecclesiology’, in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. by Pete Ward (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 204.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

that will, ultimately, always be a mystery beyond social scientific inquiry.

Christopher Craig Brittain, while acknowledging the importance of Webster's warning to safeguard a starting place for ecclesiology in the nature of God, interprets Webster's account of the church as 'a firm marginalization of the visible historical church, in deference of the pure invisible church'.¹⁷ By focusing on the individual, the abstract, and the eschatological, Brittain believes that Webster renders ecclesiology incapable of dealing fully with collective sin by the church. Brittain argues that, if for Webster 'the acts of the church are not acts of pure natural spontaneity, but movements moved by God',¹⁸ then when members of Christ's church commit great evil it must be reckoned either as a movement of God or merely the sinful acts of individuals. Brittain sees Webster's construction as inadequate to talk about the sin of the church and thus as incapable of helping the church to uncover and repent of corporate sin.¹⁹

One World

We seem to be left hanging between these two great dangers in bringing ecclesiology and ethnography into dialogue. On the one hand, ecclesiology, if done without reference to the lived experience of Christians, leaves our understanding of the church aloof and disconnected from the needs of the church's members and the world they are called to love. On the other hand, if ecclesiology cedes the descriptive task to social sciences before undertaking theological reflection, ecclesiology runs the risk of passively adopting an essentially naturalistic view of the world and being relegated to a second-order science behind scientific sources of 'real' knowledge.

Paul Fiddes suggests a balance in his discussion of integrating ethnography into ecclesiology. He, like Webster, grounds the doctrine of the church in the nature of God as triune. This is arrived at through deductive use of scripture, tradition, and liturgy.²⁰ However, he argues that deductive approaches to ecclesiology have to be used alongside inductive methods, like those in ethnography. He argues this, not only from 'external' reasons such as how Western thought has had a disproportionate influence on traditional theology, but also from 'internal', theological reasons.

Fiddes points to the incarnation. To this he adds sacrament and revelation as theological ideas that lead us to look for the presence and

¹⁷ Christopher Craig Brittain, 'Why Ecclesiology Cannot Live by Doctrine Alone', *Ecclesial Practices* 1, no. 1 (2014): p. 19.

¹⁸ Webster, 'In the Society of God', p. 215.

¹⁹ Brittain, 'Why Ecclesiology Cannot Live by Doctrine Alone', p. 21.

²⁰ Paul Fiddes, 'Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds?' in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. by Pete Ward (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 13.

direction of God in human history and culture.²¹ These ideas push us to do more than simply overlay received theological principles on our experiences, but to seek God in our cultures and tangible, ordinary realities. ‘God communicates God’s own self through actions, relationships, and symbols in daily life, though this self-offering is fully expressed only in the person of Jesus.’ So, the person of Jesus Christ, for Fiddes, is both the warrant and the boundary for seeking the presence of God in empirical study. The incarnation of Jesus reveals that ‘faith is not a mere matter of words but is *embodied*’ and this same incarnation directs us away from relativism.²²

Even if it is accepted that both the deductive and inductive are needed in faithful ecclesiology, the problem remains of how these two are functionally brought together. Even if it is accepted that the church is defined in the triune God through God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ, how will this lead to a methodology that will enable us to utilise ethnography to better understand the theology of the church without doing violence to either?

Fiddes proposes a model that does not simply resolve the tension between two worlds in dialogue but imagines one world. Writing about practical theology using social scientific inquiry, he says, ‘It is not a mere matter of correlation, but integration.’²³ This is possible because all of our research is in the ‘all-embracing environment of the triune God’.²⁴ He sees the doctrine of the Trinity as not only being reflected in the community of the church, but also revealing that God had included all of creation in the divine life. This means, according to Fiddes, that the body of Christ in the world may be found outside of the church also. Fiddes writes of the body of Christ:

Different bodies in the world – the individual body of Christ; the sacraments of bread, wine, and water; the eucharist community; groups in society; and all the variety of matter in nature – are then all related to a common space. The space they occupy in God is not a kind of container, but a reality characterized by relationships, and in this way Christ can be embodied in all of them; his form can be recognized in them, and in all of them he can take flesh.²⁵

What is indicative of finding the body of Christ is whether the body observed reflects a relationship like a father sending a son and a son selflessly consenting to give himself. Fiddes finds this expansive view of the body of Christ also reflected in Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*, where Bonhoeffer claims that ‘Christ ‘takes form’ in the world.’²⁶ For Fiddes, finding these different forms

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 19 (*italics original*).

²³ Paul S. Fiddes, ‘Ecclesiology and Ethnography: One World Revisited’, *Jurnal Teologic* 15, no. 1 (2016), p. 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁵ Paul Fiddes, ‘Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds?’, p. 32.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

of the body of Christ means there is plenty of room for social scientific models and ecclesial models to interact in a single integrated world of reflection.

Research in the Penultimate

Following Fiddes to Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, we find other resources for help in understanding how theological convictions and qualitative observations can exist together one world and how the researcher can navigate the epistemological tension between them. The two dangers for aloof theology and naturalised social science are similar to the ways that Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests we are tempted when acting in the penultimate. In *Ethics* Bonhoeffer talks about how we care for someone pastorally who has experienced the loss of a loved one. He writes that he would often stay silent instead of sharing hopeful words of Christian doctrine. In this Bonhoeffer was not denying the reality of the resurrection, but 'adopting a penultimate attitude'.²⁷ For Bonhoeffer, the redemption which is accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, made available through grace alone, is the ultimate reality to which everything else in creation is cast as penultimate.

Bonhoeffer describes two temptations in relating this penultimate reality with the ultimate: radicalism and compromise. Radicalism sees the penultimate as the enemy of the ultimate. 'Everything penultimate in human behavior is sin and denial.'²⁸ It must be avoided or destroyed. This reflects a view of ecclesiology similar to the one advocated by Webster, one where ecclesiology is almost entirely incompatible with ethnography and cannot risk being made impure by its methods.

The other temptation that Bonhoeffer describes is that of compromise. In this temptation the ultimate is seen as being too far-off and inaccessible to really matter.

The world still stands; the end is not yet here; there are still penultimate things which must be done, in fulfilment of the responsibility for this world which God has created. Account must still be taken of men as they are.'²⁹

This temptation is reflected in an ecclesiology that is dissolved into the naturalised world view of ethnography.

For Bonhoeffer, radicalism betrays a hatred for God's creation and compromise betrays a hatred for redemption by grace alone. He, like Fiddes,

²⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. by Eberhard Bethge, trans. by Neville Horton Smith. (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 126.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

argues that the solution for how to relate the penultimate to the ultimate is found in the person of Jesus Christ. The person of Jesus Christ is key for how our doctrines *about* the church relate to our lived experience *of* the church.

In the incarnation we learn of the love of God for His creation; in the crucifixion we learn of the judgment of God upon all flesh; and in the resurrection we learn of God's will for a new world.³⁰

These elements of Christian faith cannot be separated. Incarnation alone leads to compromise or ceding authority to the social sciences. Cross and resurrection alone leads to radicalism or abstract ecclesiology aloof from lived experience.

Conclusion

So, we conclude, the practical theologian must accept that we live and study in the penultimate. We exist in a time and space defined by God's love of God's creation and God's choice to honour the human experience by taking on flesh and participating in that experience. The incarnation insists that practical theologians listen to the human experience from the beginning of their research. This does not confuse the ordering of Creator and creation, as Webster warns, but recognises the presence and revealed knowledge of the Creator among the creation. Likewise, the practical theologian recognises that the ultimate is yet to come. The crucifixion and resurrection shine a light on the ways that our human experience falls short of the full humanity revealed in Jesus. The crucifixion invites us to reflect theologically on the distance between our humanity and Jesus' humanity. The resurrection invites us to propose revisions to the practices of our human and church experience.

These insights of Fiddes and Bonhoeffer help to move the philosophical conversation of the ecclesiology and ethnography movement beyond two separate worlds, with the radicalism of abstract theology set over and against the compromise of social scientific naturalism. However, methodological specifics for this integration are still contested. Much more work and prayer are needed.

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³⁰ Ibid., pp. 130-131.