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Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church
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The common structure of theological education implies that one learns "real theology" by studying classic texts, then figures out how to "apply" these truths in some practical course. Theology becomes a kind of language with an inherently correct grammar. Like linguistic structuralism, which ignores the social conditions of language formation, such a view implies that theology's purpose is the regulation of faithful living (speaking) by reproducing a preexistent doctrinal (linguistic) system. I think here of a recent divinity student who, when asked to interpret her field education assignment theologically, complained that the Christology of this local church was "inadequately Chalcedonian." That many churches would be "heretical" by such a litmus test is one indication of the limitations of theology so understood; never mind the question about why repeating the past is a good way to respond to the contemporary situation.

There are alternatives to such a "structuralist" view of theology. Liberation theologies, for example, pay attention to the oppressive and potentially liberative function of Christian tradition within specific social contexts. They explore the ways "the tradition" is plural, inflected with

power, and marked by social location. However, even liberationist theologies are capable of offering monolithic accounts of the function of tradition. Even as liberation theologies correct systematics by making “contextual” a feature of theological discourse, only the occasional liberationist has attended to the complexities and actual shape of context by offering a thick description of popular religion.

Thus the need to better understand how Christian traditions are actually performed in the lives of different populations has pushed me beyond the usual tools of theology. More than systematics and liberation analysis are needed if we are to perceive how discourses are “received” as well as produced. And it is interest in this “more” that has directed me to the rich research strategies of ethnography.

Primarily associated with cultural and social anthropology, ethnography has been appropriated by a number of other disciplines as well, e.g., sociology, cultural studies, and psychology, to name a few. With roots in nineteenth century “armchair” anthropologists’ use of missionary and travel documentation to create comparative accounts of human society, twentieth century ethnographic approaches came to require participatory research and first-hand observation. In order to identify the distinguishing characteristics of a culture, one must spend considerable time engaging its people. Methodological approaches came to include involvement in the activities and practices of a community, interviewing of individuals and groups, along with study of documents and material resources. At least since the 1980s, issues of the authority and constructed character of the ethnographer’s account of a culture have been topics of ongoing and fascinating debate.

The interpretive categories provided by ethnography do not, of course, allow for causal or explanatory claims, such as those sought by quantitative procedures. Indeed, one of its limitations from a social science perspective is that the learnings from an ethnographically designed case study are not generalizable in the way quantitative procedures might provide. However, ethnography is appropriate to theological concerns precisely because qualitative research provides access to the self-understandings and worldviews of living subjects. How a group shaped by so-called “normative” teachings about Christology, for example, might reframe such themes in tandem with other cultural, gender, and racialized discourses is an exploration made possible by ethnographic work. Ethnography provides an important contextualization of belief. How do different beliefs converge, and in which situations? What resonances do they have for differently classed, racialized, and gendered groups? Such questions inevitably nudge one toward normative issues. Are there better ways to frame the circulation of relevant biblical and theological themes than the unidirectional preaching and teaching that is typical of “normative” theological discourse? What about the powerful function of music for people without symbolizing abilities?

In order to better understand the way Christian faith might intersect with racism in the contemporary South, I did a theological study of an interracial Methodist church. Ethnography's tools provided me with a way to approach this fascinatingly diverse communal faith as a lived subject matter. Engaging in two and one-half years of participant observation in this small church, I did interviews, collected documents, and took part in worship and other church activities to get a sense of how members understood their call to diversity.

The self-understandings that emerged from my study connected languages pertaining to racism with the languages of Christian faith, as they intersected with the other social worlds of participants. While biblical and classical theological themes were often invoked to authorize the church's diversity, they were rarely used without a linkage to modern terms like inclusiveness and color-blindness. Combinations of color-blindness with explicit theological themes, for example, had very different outcomes, depending upon whether employed by African-American members or those designated "white." This is because such discourses were linked with other associations that overrode or "shifted" their original function. I stress terms like "linked" and "shifted" to indicate that meaning circulates in more complex ways than suggested by the hackneyed image of a unidirectional theology that, as "theory," causes practice. In relation to racialized cultures of "black" and "white" there seemed to be no neutral theological language that did not do racialized work, even when only implicit.

Ethnographic attention to the densities of faith involves potential challenges for normative theology. First is the obvious challenge that theology may not be limited to expert, rarified discourse or the language used by believers only when they refer to God. Constructively this point entails the discernment already made by congregational studies scholars, e.g., whether marked as such or not, much of the activity of Christians is "theological." In my study not only was the "secular" language of color–blindness important to trace, but many of the nonreligious practices of the community became more important than explicitly religious activities for bridging racial differences. Ethnographic research surfaces both the hybridity of language and the crucial theological function of many behaviors that are not marked as ecclesiastical. A second challenge to the adequacy of "talk" emerged as I observed forms of discomfort and visceral reaction that did not completely surface in their narratives, e.g., white members' complaints that the church was "too black." Such reactions imply that bodily enculturations and interactions matter as much as discourse. This raises the question of how a notion of "tradition" might recognize deeply embedded bodily practices that are constitutive of a society's identity. If we are as shaped by markers of cultural "othering" as by inscribed memory, constructs of tradition require attention to bodies and affect in more substantive ways.

To teach theology in a way that takes lived faith more seriously is quite a challenge. I teach a

course on prophetic ministry that tries to do this. Subtitled “Creating Communities of Justice,” the course requires students to participate in a setting that can be characterized as a site for prophetic ministry. Although minimal training is provided in ethnographic method, the assignment requires students to interview participants in these settings with the aim of discerning the community’s self-understanding and its implicit “moral languages.” Any and all practices are to be considered pertinent to such ministry. Since some of the settings are not explicitly religious, this forces students to hear ordinary languages in a new way and take them seriously. They also begin to understand that “theological” and “church” refer to much broader and messier social realities than the familiar “church vs. world” paradigm would suggest.

I include a more complex assignment in a course on practical theology, a field with considerable support for ethnographic work. Here the aim is to enhance students’ understanding of the interplay of theology and practice along several lines: the generation of theological discourse, the social location of the interpreter and the situation under scrutiny, and how such realities matter for theology’s strategic response to a situation. The students must first choose an issue of vital importance, articulate their preunderstandings and commitments with the issue, fleshing out the way their social location frames and limits their engagement. Part two requires an interview with someone else who is engaged with the issue from a distinctly different point of view than their own. Here, students must employ interview techniques and pay critical attention to social context. A third requires them to place their own preunderstandings and practices with respect to the issue into critical dialogue with those of the interview subject, identifying the different insights that are surfaced. The final part of the assignment involves identifying a position on the issue in light of the intersection of different views, as well as communicating their position in a relevant way to their dialogue partner. The assignment is enormously helpful in revealing the fluidity of theological discourse and its connection to social location and power, as it plunges students into the thickness of lived faith and surfaces with critical attention to the role of existential concern in the doing of theology.

In conclusion I should say that this pull toward ethnographic work in theology was preceded by an important development in religious studies. The insight that the study of Western religions has too long been focused on the study of texts led to the study of “lived religion” by a number of religious studies scholars. As I see this interest well developed in such places, and as I weigh its deep impact on my own thinking, I can only hope that ethnography will increasingly resource the world of systematics.