Pete Ward (ed.)


Ecclesiology needs ethnography. For those to whom this proposal comes as a surprise, a potted history: at least since Nicholas Healy’s proposal for ‘ecclesiological ethnography’ in his *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), a small and diverse group of theologians has been working out what this might look like in theory and practice. This first *Perspectives* volume brings together the fruits of their conversation thus far, offering a range of reflections on the theoretical possibility and practical shape of ecclesiological ethnography. The contributors to the volume converge on the practice of ethnography for a range of dogmatic and practical reasons, but they are united by a methodological common sense: that the concrete, social and historical shape of the church is theologically significant, and that ethnography (defined broadly as any form of qualitative social science) can help us attend to it.

Ward’s opening essay frames ecclesiology’s alliance with ethnography in strategic terms: just as theology has drawn on historiographical and philosophical methods without a huge amount of methodological angst, so it can draw on ethnography. The relaxed confidence with which Ward sets up this pragmatic alliance between ecclesiology and ethnography is not reflected in the rest of the volume, however. Though many of the essays use case studies to show practitioners of ecclesiological ethnography getting on with working out how to do it in practice, they also show considerable methodological wrangling, as the contributors work out whether and how the insights of ecclesiology and ethnography fit together.

A number of different theological rationales for engaging with ethnography are on offer here. Paul Fiddes draws on themes of incarnation, sacrament and revelation to show why theologians need to engage the social and historical dimensions of the church (and use ethnography to help them), and similar doctrinal loci feature in other contributors’ discussions of the propriety of using ethnography in the study of the church. A range of different practical rationales for using ethnography are also in evidence. Richard Osmer straightforwardly states that practical theology cannot work without carrying out, drawing on and interpreting empirical research. Clare Watkins and the Action Research – Church and Society (ARCS) team use empirical study to explore the gap between the ‘espoused’ theologies of various faith groups and their ‘operant’ theologies, with the intention of encouraging participants in the research into greater theological and practical integrity (or at least encouraging them to
think about it). For Alister McGrath, ethnography facilitates a focus on theology of place; for Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Chris Scharen, ethnography helps us to attend to bodies; for Luke Bretherton, ethnography helps political theologians not just to interpret the world, but to change it through sound judgements based on practical reason.

The contributors agree that theology must remain in the driving seat in the interdisciplinary journey with ethnography; they differ in the extent to which they allow ethnographic insights to take the wheel and redirect theological inquiry. Nicholas Healy’s thought-provoking essay allows ethnography to challenge ecclesiology by questioning the degree to which it can give us a ‘community’ at all, but concludes by putting theology firmly in control: it is the church’s theological, not empirical distinctiveness which is of primary importance. John Swinton’s paper suggests that, for theology to be demonstrably in control, explicit reference to Christian language and concepts is necessary to prevent theology collapsing into social science. McClintock Fulkerson’s attention to the ways in which the members of Good Samaritan Methodist ‘theologised’ challenges this: put simply, if we assess the ‘Christianness’ or ‘theological’ nature of an analysis by counting the number of times it name-checks God, then we ‘basically collapse the God-referent of theologia into a finite museum piece’ (p. 139). John Webster’s excellent paper raises this discussion of what it means for an ecclesiological-ethnographic analysis to be distinctively theological to another level: ecclesiology’s proximate object may be the human community of the church, but its principal object is the being and works of God. Theology is inquiry into God, and into all things ordered to God, and ecclesiology ‘has its place in the flow of Christian doctrine from teaching about God to teaching about everything else in God’ (p. 205). Ecclesiology is, therefore, derivative, and Webster suggests that placing the human community of the church at the centre of theological reflection, for whatever dogmatic reason, is inevitably and dangerously distorting. This question ought to haunt ecclesiological ethnography for the next few years.

Many of the papers remain largely at the level of proposal; it is unfair to find fault with this (given that the book is billed as such) but occasionally one longs to move beyond rearrangements of the proposal and get into the interesting and difficult theological questions at stake. Some of the papers (Healy, McClintock Fulkerson, and Webster deserve mention here) get into deeper theological waters, and we can look forward to further such explorations as the series progresses to a second volume, and thence to further conferences and publications. The developing series will also need to address some of the gaps in the present volume, and address some of the questions raised therein. In addition to Webster’s challenge, I will mention two.