Book Reviews

Pete Ward (ed.)


Inaugurating a new series, Pete Ward (editor) has brought together an impressive collection of contributors to address the theological significance of fieldwork. Broadly situated within the turn to the subject, and more specifically within turns to culture, practices and the concrete church, this volume integrates these turns into a thickly situated argument for the role of fieldwork in the study of the church with consequential challenges for all of theology.

In the introduction, Ward argues that the gap between doctrinal accounts of the church and the lived experience of any particular congregation calls into question the plausibility of our contemporary ecclesiologies. In one of his most astute moments, Ward points to a “methodological laziness” by which he means that “it has been the custom in theological circles to talk about social realities in ways that lack credibility” (4). The book, and the series it inaugurates, seeks to address this problem by facilitating a growing conversation on the development of a theological ethnography.

The volume is organized in two parts, “The Proposal” and “The Conversation.” Here I will first trace the contributions both parts make to the theological turns I mention above.

Increasingly theologians have been mindful that theology is a cultural practice. This book, however, invites a more sustained commitment to such when it invites theologians to engage in the practice of ethnography. Throughout the book ethnography is broadly construed as qualitative research methods, or fieldwork. Those who contribute to “The Proposal” (Fiddes, Ward, Scharen and Swinton), all argue for an essential compatibility between what Paul S. Fiddes names the deductive inquiry of theology — here, ecclesiology — and the inductive inquiry of ethnography. Of course this leads to an even more important question: how are they compatible? To this question, John Swinton’s notion of a sanctified ethnography is quite helpful. By this, he means set aside for a specifically theological purpose. For Swinton, theologians who engage in ethnography ought not give themselves completely over to the
“methodological deism” of social scientific approaches to ethnography. They ought remain theologians.

A related turn in theology has come in the turn to practice. However, as Christian Scharen notes, this concept of "practice" draws upon a number of theoretical frameworks. A number of parallel continuums might untangle some of the different uses. For example, does one mean to refer to conscious or unconscious practices; intentional or unintentional action; highly structured ritual or everyday life; official ecclesial or folk practices? The interplay here can be significant as this book demonstrates. In his consideration of Eucharistic practices, Scharen advocates for a carnal theology: Eucharist theology both of the body and from the body. Pushing practical theological reflection on bodies and bodily practices even further, Mary McClintock Fulkerson considers the "incorporative practices" of cultural locations when she experiences implicit racism and ablism in her ethnographic study of a congregation. In their own ways, Luke Bretheron and Richard R. Osmer offer further extensions of this turn. Brethren reflects theologically upon his years embedded in community organizing in London as both a participant and researcher in an effort to develop practical reason and judgment towards even further political action, while Osmer draws upon empirical research on families and the theological concept of the missio dei to explicate the significance of churches rethinking family ministries.

The tension between the way the church talks about itself (ecclesiology) and the lived experience of those actually in the church is central to Nicholas M. Healy’s Church, World and Christian Life. There, Healy criticized overly abstract and idealized accounts of the church, arguing instead for a turn to the concrete church. In many ways this book is a response to Healy’s then call for ecclesiological ethnography. Elizabeth Phillips traces what she calls the “ethnographic turn” and calls for deeper “attention to the complex admixture of faithful and flawed convictions and practices” present in congregations (106). Here, Healy echoes Phillips’ more critical approach and questions the conventional ways of understanding the distinctiveness of the church. It is not empirically distinct, but rather theologically distinct he argues. John Webster adds an additional layer of such inquiry by ordering a hierarchy of ecclesiological investigations. For Webster, dogmatic ecclesiology and ethnographic study of the phenomena of the church work in tandem.

Beyond the book’s contributions to these theological turns, two additional points merit mention.

First, several of the contributors make significant epistemological arguments concerning the importance of such embodied approaches to embodied ways of knowing. Alister E. McGrath points out that all our observations are