

**Roundtable on *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*:
The Right to a Nonprojected Future**

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There is a wonderful invitational quality to Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen's *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*. I admire the tone and the kinds of conversations that the book has unleashed and that are so thought-provokingly assembled here. Borne out of a close and passionately engaged reading, the commentaries by Emily Reimer-Barry, Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Ted A. Smith (in the order I read them) are sympathetic, critical, methodical and creatively constructive all at once. In their generosity, the commentators restore a kind of infancy, a sense of potential and possibility, to the book's call for a theology and ethics that is marked by knowledge of the ethnographic Other, present but also absent, both worldly and particular within the totality of history, struggling to belong but at the same time transcending Christian membership. In their own commentary, Scharen and Vigen advocate for holding various

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binaries (reflexivity and self-absorption, objectivity and subjectivity, etc.) in “dynamic tension”—living in them instead of trying to resolve them. The goal is to create “as nuanced a picture as possible,” recognizing that there are always risks and complexities to be engaged when describing lived realities.

The trust here is that the granular study of how beliefs, attitudes and values are refashioned and molded, as people navigate messy constellations of power and knowledge and face the unexpected, brings into view alternative ontologies that can widen our sense of what is socially possible and desirable, be it at the cost of lowering our ability, real or imaginary, to discern the true truth or universal laws and historical continuities. What is at stake is “to defend the right to a nonprojected future as one of the truly inalienable rights of every person and nation,” in the luminous and always contemporary words of the late Albert O. Hirschman.¹ Scharen and Vigen’s brave book and this powerful set of commentaries make a strong plea for our own right as thinkers, across faiths and disciplines, to break open the expected value of the future: to remain relentlessly empirical yet open to theories, constantly tinkering with stories and interpretations as we face the active embroilment of life, reason, ethics and hope and try to give it a critical, albeit unfinished form, on a blank page.

As I read the responses by Reimer-Barry, Fulkerson and Smith and then Scharen and Vigen’s response to the responses (!) and tried to find an entry point into the conversation, I was reminded of Gilles Deleuze’s “Letter to a Harsh Critic” (published in the wake of the academic uproar created by the publication of *Anti-Oedipus*²). In responding to a young critic deemed “charming, clever, mischievous, even vicious sometimes,” Deleuze states that there is much at stake in different forms of reading. If one takes a book “as a box with something inside,” one’s task is to interrogate and search for its true signified or to set off after signifiers and then “write a book about the book, and so on and on.”³ But there is another way of reading—less audit-like, author-trapping or prosecutorial. We can see the book as “a little non-signifying machine,” and the question then is ““Does it work, and how does it work?”⁴ How does it work for you?” In this second way of reading, “Something comes through or it does not. ... It’s like plugging into an electric circuit. ... It relates a book directly to what’s Outside. A book is a little cog in much more complicated external machinery.”⁵

As a reader, I appreciate how the commentators established a zone of proximity with *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, sharing how it worked for them and what it opened up, rather than simply projecting deficiencies and indicting the authors for failing to deliver ultimate truths and magic bullets or to fulfill some imagined promise. In taking the book this way, the commentators composed their own think pieces, giving hints of their rich field experiences, intellectual adventures and ethical affinities. Their “intensive way of reading, in contact with what’s outside the book, as a flow meeting other flows,”⁶ brings into view “experiences of other people ... giving fresh perspectives to our theological imagination” (Reimer-Barry), “unique wisdoms ... off our [academic] screens” (Fulkerson) and conversations that “mark one moment in an in-

tellectual movement and make possible the next” (Smith). These are all effects that Scharen and Vigen could not have anticipated but certainly welcomed as the book started to interact with other things. “Everywhere there are starting points, intersections and junctions, that enable us to learn something new if we refuse, firstly, radical distance, secondly the distribution of roles, and thirdly the boundaries between territories.”⁷

This active form of reading—“reading with love,” as Deleuze would say⁸—is emancipatory. It makes it possible for others to engage in what texts unleash, the forms of understanding that they open up between us (writers, readers and other readers of writers and readers) and between these entangled lines: a truth/thought/poetic effect that is owned by no one. This openness to the existence of a new element—an it, an indefinite, neither text/performer nor reader/spectator, but something that, in coming about in the provisional encounter between them, generates new fields of understanding, possibility and accountability—is exactly what I long to see more often in interactions among anthropologists and among social scientists and theologians, as well as between scholars and their interlocutors in the field.

Reimer-Barry’s commentary is structured as a kind of working-through of her own experiences and challenges in doing ethnography. Her piece opens with an ethnographic account from her own research at a safe house for migrant workers in Tijuana, which raises some of her key points about structural violence and agency, how “non-experts” bring theological questions to the table and the perennial challenge of reflexivity in fieldwork and writing that should not paralyze us but be an opportunity “to see ourselves in a new light” and to find ways to name the realities that “threaten human flourishing” and even kill. In the field, we are indeed challenged to listen to people (if we want to learn something other than what we already assume to know)—their self-understandings, the crossroads of their destinies, their storytelling, their spirituality—with deliberate openness to life in all its refractions.

Ethnography’s characters are those who might otherwise remain forgotten, and they want to be represented, to be part of a matrix in which there is someone else to see and to think with and through their travails and prospects. Implicit here is the vital understanding that ethnographic work and the life stories of Others might surprise us, create forms of understanding between us, emancipate us from a priori assumptions and illuminate entry points for alternative practice and politics.

In her response, Fulkerson also provides compelling ethnographic accounts and opens up many questions for further discussion. She praises the book for “fleshing out lived faith” and for its transformative epistemic force. “Wonderful shifts in defining ‘theology’ ... are emerging from this book,” she writes. At issue is how ethnographic realities find their way into concept-work and theological reflection. People’s own theorizing of their conditions and modes of transcendence may well challenge contemporary regimes of truth, including philosophical universals and classic theology/ethics subjugation to power and privilege. The relationship between ethnography and theology/ethics, in fact, may be more productively seen as one of creative tension and cross-pollination.

Ted Smith opens his response with a discussion of the book's success "in helping strange bedfellows find one another": one of its main achievements is bringing together different (and sometimes conflicting) schools of theology in one place and showing how ethnography is relevant to them all. A "cultural turn" in many contemporary schools of theology/ethics (liberationist and postliberal), he points out, leads almost naturally to the use of ethnography.

Nearly a century of critical theory, including feminist and postcolonial critiques, has indeed dislodged the sway of crude universals to attend more closely to the specificity and the world-historical significance of people's everyday experience. Ethnographic rendering can open up new attention to people's arts of existence and the political stakes that make up the ordinary.⁹ The slow, granular excavations that ethnography renders visible also highlight how affects, raw concepts and mundane details make up the friction-filled, para-infrastructures of everyday living that are articulated against the background of institutional decays and rifts that deepen.¹⁰ The disparate registers of precarity engaged by ethnographers can thus hold off what anthropologist Kathleen Stewart calls "the quick jump from concept to world—that precarious habit of academic thought."¹¹ She incites us to develop a distinct perceptual capacity out of what is in flux, to become part and parcel not of Life or the Lost but of "live forms." People keep searching, against all odds, for human connection and for ways to endure, at times reworking political economies and sublimating symptoms in their struggles to craft a relationship to the present world.¹²

As ethnographers, we can strive to do more than simply mobilize real-world messiness to complicate—or serve—ordered philosophy, reductive medical diagnostics, statistics-centered policy approaches or official God-talk. Both the evidentiary force and theoretical contribution of ethnography might be intimately linked to how we become apprenticed (as Scharen and Vigen put it) and *try* (the verb is crucial) to give form to people's arts of living. Attending to life as it is lived and adjudicated by people on the ground produces a multiplicity of approaches, theoretical moves and countermoves, an array of interpretive angles as various as the individuals drawn to practice ethnography. At stake is finding creative ways of not letting the ethnographic die in our accounts of actuality.¹³ We must attend to the ways people's own struggles and visions of themselves and others—their life stories—create holes in dominant theories and interventions and unleash a vital plurality: being in motion, ambiguous and contradictory, not reducible to a single narrative, projected into the future, transformed by recognition, and thus the very fabric of alternative world-making.

This is life's immanence, which always includes forms of sublimation and creativity, however marginal or obscure—call it a "horizontal transcendence."¹⁴ These impulses, as deeply human as the institutional forces that constrain them, need social recognition and care in order to be sustained and to acquire political value. They also stir us to find a form, in Paul Rabinow's words, "that would allow the conceptual work, especially its motion, to be embodied in a narrative of lived experience."¹⁵

All these "dynamic tensions" between subjects and scribes should not paralyze our storytelling, but rather find expression, so that readers can grow closer to people. Is this theological? Is this

Christian? Does it matter? For whom? Maybe the future will tell.

Or, as Jorge Luis Borges so brilliantly writes about the fate of “The Theologians” battling over heresies, orthodoxy, and the risks of novelty: “The end of this story can only be related in metaphors since it takes place in the kingdom of heaven, where there is no time” and where “the orthodox believer and the heretic, the abhorrer and the abhorred, the accuser and the accused formed one single person.”¹⁶

I am not familiar with current Christian theological landscapes and debates, but from my theological stint in the early 1980s in the Brazilian Lutheran and broader liberationist worlds, I can only imagine the disciplinary and institutional anxieties that *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* has fed or sparked. In my reading, I could sense some of these anxieties hovering over the commentators. Fulkerson and Smith, however, address openly and deftly the question of what is, after all, theological about ethnography. Orthodoxy “will not work for this shift to ethnographic study,” Fulkerson argues. For Smith, seeing theology *within* life as it plays out “presses towards a genuinely theological ethnography.”

A kind of “theological anthropology,” Fulkerson asserts, sees indirect signs of God in “altered social relationships” and uses Christian themes as an interpretive logic to make sense of things. What makes this “theo-logic” not simply an extension or emulation of secular logics is “the assumption that the human telos is theocentric.” The consideration of the expendability or necessity of this “theo-centric” assumption for interpretive approaches is a daring upshot of sincere engagement with the worlds and prospects of ethnography, and it restores a creative plasticity to the theological craft, the power to grow out of itself, of making God-talk one body with the near and the present, closely engaged with what people themselves do. Such a line of questioning shows the vitality of theology (rather than its decaying or secularization à la John Milbank¹⁷ as evoked by Smith) and re-opens, via ethnography, the important debate of what is or should be the relationship between theology and anthropology.

There is a growing anthropological interest in Christianity on various fronts (grassroots and globalized religions, humanitarianism, political theology, morality and caregiving, cognitive processes¹⁸). Following Fulkerson, we could envision a fruitful exchange that would move beyond a reductionist usage by theologians of ethnography as method, as well as anthropology’s own limited and limiting usage of theology either to explain some of its own secular assumptions or as “data” about the faith systems of given communities.¹⁹ As anthropologist Joel Robbins has provocatively argued, “Theology ... possesses a commitment to the reality and force of otherness we no longer find in ourselves.”²⁰

In other words, there is as much lost by theologians when they mine ethnography only for its research methods as there is by anthropologists when they treat theology as only another kind of ethnographic data. Ethnography has revolutionary potential for theology, and theological sensitivities and concerns might well help ethnographers be more mindful of the existential and ethical stakes of our engagements. We could all certainly learn from hearing how theologians would iden-

tify and interpret theological dimensions (implicit and explicit) in ethnography and by exploring together how theological reflection could illuminate the worlds we reveal.

Smith brings insights from critical theorist Theodor Adorno into the conversation as another possible way to approach the novel as a question in *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*. He is drawn to Adorno's embrace of ordinary ways of knowing and his criticism of the "general insecurity" about such knowledge as "abstract and unconvincing." And from Adorno, Smith takes that "concept" and "entity" (metaphysics and positivism) should not be fused, but should remain in a dynamic kind of tension. Looking at the gaps between theological concepts and ethnographically described realities, not collapsing one into the other (in either direction), opens up new "charged spaces" for freedom. He suggests that a theological ethnographer operating in these spaces might be willing and able to take more risks and to better manage the methodological challenges posed by the imbrication of power, knowledge and interests. In that charged in-between space, ethnography can "do the work of hope."

Scharen and Vigen dwell in this charged space and agree that the answer to the question about how ethnography itself is theological does not lie in reaching for theoretical lenses with which to read a given situation as if it were a text. I agree that ethnography is neither proto-philosophy nor embodied theology. Scharen and Vigen further argue that the very act of doing ethnography, "surrendering" to a situation and becoming "apprenticed" to it, is itself a theological methodology. Yet, as I have been suggesting, there may be a certain reductionism to seeing ethnography as a "theological methodology." Such a reduction may be inevitable in this discussion, as Christianity always already shapes the engagement and learning of these ethnographer-theologians even without the post hoc imposition of categories. The challenge, Scharen and Vigen state, "is to attend to normative claims embodied in practice." But the fact remains that the givens of religion—perhaps the idea of "Deus Absconditus" *is a propos here*—shape ethnographic research and interpretation in particular ways: "Our initial impulse might be to argue that ethnography is based upon immersion in local settings in order to elicit fine-grained understanding of lived claims of God's transformative presence."

Scharen and Vigen conclude with a call to constantly reevaluate what we said, what we learned, what we got right and what we did not. It is this critical return that I think is indispensable. Ethnography not only reveals the present as embattled and unfinished; it also displaces dominant analytical frameworks, thus marking the ethnographic fieldwork as a birthplace of sorts, out of which a mode of inquiry and a way of narration, as well as the possibility of a distinct public, came into existence. I say public, for ours is a practice that also begs for the emergence of a third, a reader, a community of sorts, that is neither the character nor the writer, which will manifest and carry forward anthropology's or, for that matter, theology's potential to become a mobilizing force in this world. Significantly, the ethnographic work also makes it possible for us to return to this other "home" and to know it, through the workings of time, anew. "And the end of all exploring," in the words of T.S. Eliot, "will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."²¹

Catarina, the main character of my book *Vita*, was left to die in an asylum in southern Brazil yet kept writing and anticipated a return to the world of the living.²² As I am continually drawn back to our dialogues, and as new, variably positioned cohorts of readers and students are affected by Catarina's thinking and struggles in different ways, both the force and meaning of her life and thinking and the anthropologies it has generated remain open and in flux, forbidding any false sense of closure or certainty.

I feel that I owe these returns, and the unfinishedness they sustain, to Catarina and so many Others, like Evangivaldo, the main character of my longitudinal study of AIDS treatment among the Brazilian poor.²³ "My politics is to see things humanly," Evangivaldo used to say. In science (and in philosophy for that matter), human subjects appear, by and large, as sharply bounded, generic, and over-determined, if they are present at all. But ethnography allows other pathways and potentials for its subjects—and for itself. In our returns to the encounters that shaped us and the knowledge of human conditions we produced, we can learn from our experiences anew and live them differently, acknowledging an inexhaustible richness and mystery at the core of the people we learn from.

There are, of course, many different ways, both figurative and literal, of returning to our sites and subjects or of reengaging notes, memories and visual archives. Revisiting earlier work, we might bring into view the broader academic drama in which the ethnographic account and critique was imbricated. Literally returning to places and people we worked with—to say more honestly what one saw or to rectify misrenderings or to understand what merciless political economies have done to generations—certainly causes a distinctive longitudinal perspective to emerge, allowing insight not only into how time works on our own senses and sensibilities, but also (and perhaps most importantly) into how the world itself shifts as the years pass.

Caring returns, relentless curiosity and a willingness to hold certainty in abeyance to stay closer to people and the continuing, unbounded force of experience are all indispensable foundations of ethnographic engagement with human realities. In contrast to the data points of statistical studies, the figures of philosophy, and the sinning subject of official theological dogma, our ethnographic subjects have a future—and we become a part of it, in unexpected ways.

Continually adjusting itself to the reality of contemporary lives and worlds, the ethnographic venture thus has the potential of art: to invoke neglected human potentials and to expand the limits of understanding and imagination—a people yet to come, ourselves included. Ethnographic works, both within and beyond anthropology, and their intense readings can challenge perceptual deficits of all kinds, open new avenues of thought and inform the continuous efforts of multiple stakeholders to liberate human potentials and futures, wherever they are thwarted.

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(Endnotes)

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