

“Ethnography and Pastoral Wisdom Literature”
Comments for a panel on scholarship and research
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The question for the panel: “What kinds of scholarship are needed to resource education, pastoral work, and the life of faith of the kind we’ve been discussing?”

Reading Tom’s book, I was struck by how much it exemplifies so much of the work of the Valparaiso Project over the last 20 years. Here is a book on one of the most important practices of Christian faith. It is a powerful extension of the trajectory sketched across *Practicing Our Faith*, *Practicing Theology*, *Way to Live*, each of the books on individual practices, the project’s website, and more. One of the claims that Dorothy and Craig made about practices in *Practicing Theology* was that they were the “right size” for analysis. I think this book puts that virtue on full display. It has limits, and those limits are set by a concrete church practice. They are not set by a discipline, a time period, or an author. They are set by a practice. The Christian funeral gives the book a clear center. But then the book drills so deeply at that center-point that it opens passageways into huge subterranean aquifers – the deepest water, the stuff that sustains the whole of Christian life. This practice is the right size for some of the thinking we need most.

Tom’s book also exemplifies the kind of work called for in *For Life Abundant*. It attends to a way of life over time. It recognizes the ways that life is enacted by bodies – living and dead – in particular places. It sees the shared and collaborative nature of the practice. And it does not just affirm the intelligence of practice – like a little pat on the back, “You really *do* know something, Pastor!” – but offers a virtuoso performance of that intelligence. Above all: Here is scholarship that seeks to build up ministers and communities who can be signs of and workers for God’s gift of life abundant.

I’m also struck by the ways the book exemplifies a concept that has informed and been refined in conversation with these various projects: Craig’s notion of pastoral imagination. Pastoral imagination, Craig writes, is the distinctive form of intelligence that can emerge through the practice of pastoral ministry. “It is the capacity to perceive the ‘more’ in what is already before us” (FLA, 48). I think this book relates to pastoral imagination in multiple ways.

- It serves and forms pastoral imagination. It gives a broad vision, history, a reading of the times, some rules of thumb, discussion of concrete cases... reading this book would nurture any pastor's imagination, even if by disagreement.
- The book also acknowledges the need for pastoral imagination in the reader. It is never wishy-washy; on the contrary, it is deliciously sharp in places. But sometimes – as in the case of the flag on the coffin - the book doesn't give a definitive answer. It says a wise pastor will need to see what's really going on and act appropriately. The book respects the reader. It not only gives but also *requires* pastoral imagination.
- The book is also written out of pastoral imagination. Not every book that forms pastoral imagination is or should be written out of one. Pastors have to learn from many sources – sometimes even hammering the gold of the Egyptians into vessels of the Temple. But here the reader's pastoral imagination is formed by coming into contact with a great one.

This book is clearly one fruit of the Valparaiso Project. The literature on practice, the *telos* of life abundant, the emphasis on pastoral imagination ... they're all here. As a teacher I try to give a clear vision for an assignment and then supplement those guidelines with a good example. Sometimes it takes a while to get one. But it raises the quality of everyone's work when I have one to share, when I can say, "See – like *this*. In your own way, on your own topic, out of your own vision. But here's one example. Like this." Dorothy and Craig, this book is not the first example you've ever had. But it is a particularly significant one. A focus on practices of the life of faith? Undertaken for the sake of life abundant? Building up pastoral imagination? See... like *this*.

Two Genres

Tom's book is distinctive - in its excellence, but also in its genre. I would call that genre *pastoral wisdom literature*. I want to think about that genre in relation to a genre that seems to be everywhere these days: ethnography. I mean to use "ethnography" pretty broadly here, to include a bundle of practices in the social sciences that focus on qualitative research – not statistics and surveys, but interviews and participant-observation.

By "genre" I mean a literary form, like a treatise, an essay, a novel, a sermon, a pastor's note in a newsletter, or a memoir. Forms like these are not just empty boxes into which we put some kind of content. They involve habits, dispositions, and characteristic ways of being and acting. A genre is in some ways like a musical instrument. Each instrument has certain capacities and certain limitations. On a tuba, say, a skilled player can easily play John Philip Sousa. The tuba is made for that kind of music. But it is not clear that even a very skilled tuba player can play Blackalicious. If it happens, it will involve a transformation of both the tuba and

backpacker hip-hop. Like a musical instrument, a genre makes some things possible and other things difficult.

I want to focus on pastoral wisdom literature and ethnography as genres. Tom's book gives us a good example of pastoral wisdom literature. Ethnography, for our conversation, might require more introduction. It has been gaining strength as a genre for more than thirty years – and for at least the last twenty years in theological and religious studies. It is important to see the ways in which ethnographers have – like Tom - drawn inspiration from the work of the Valparaiso Project. The call for attention to practice, especially, has been an important impetus for the proliferation of ethnographic projects. The Valparaiso Project made “practice” one of the crucial loci for theological scholarship. And it has been an extraordinarily fruitful site for thinking together. It has been generative of work in many directions. Ethnography is one of those directions.

I want to suggest that ethnographic projects have also drawn support from at least two other sources:

First, it draws support from its fit with a wider turn to culture. If you're convinced that all knowledge is from some location, and that that location is best described as “cultural,” then the study of culture becomes a kind of grounding discipline. And so cultural studies has displaced the history of ideas, analytic philosophy, and literary theory – to name just three grounding disciplines of the last 100 years – as the discipline that has something to say to every other discipline. It will probably be replaced in time by neuroscience, but, for now, cultural studies plays a unique role in intellectual life. Of the forms of cultural studies, ethnography fits best with commitments to populism and embodiment that often inspire academics and ministers. Not the ideas of elites, but the practices of people! And so ethnography is a genre that fits the times.

Second, it matters that ethnography can pass as *Wissenschaft*, by which I mean the kind of knowledge proper to the natural and physical sciences, the knowledge born of hypothesis and empirical research, the knowledge cultivated most directly by the modern university. The university is – thankfully – a sprawling, inconsistent social creature. No pure type of the modern university exists. But if you imagine such a place, and imagine something called “practical theology” trying to define itself within it ... Knowing how to preach well is not the kind of knowledge such a university values – except, perhaps, for development and alumni relations. A fully consistent modern university *would* value knowing how to teach people to preach well – but that value would be confined entirely within a professional school. There would be no need for anyone else to notice. It would be like knowing how to teach people to take a patient's blood pressure – good for the nursing school, irrelevant in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. But knowing *about* people who preach well, or poorly, or any way at all – being able to offer an

account of such practice – *that* could be interesting to sociologists, historians, literary critics, and more. When practical theology takes the form of ethnography, it can travel across the quad. The valorization of ethnography within the university sub-culture should not be overlooked as one reason for its prominence today.

I read a fair few ethnographies these days. And I have done some very small-scale ethnographic projects of my own. One of the things that I kept thinking as I read Tom's book was that it had a lot in common with ethnographies – the book attends to practice, it is close to the ground, it involves conversations with pastors, it includes observation. But I was also struck by the differences – and how glad I was for them. This book is not ethnography, but pastoral wisdom literature. I want to take just a few minutes to think with you about the differences between those genres, why I think we need both of them, and why I'm glad Tom chose the one he did.

Pastoral wisdom literature

Pastoral wisdom literature is written from *inside* the culture it is studying. Tom has served as the clergy person at a lot of funerals. He has attended many more. He is the son of someone who has performed many funerals. He is married to someone who has performed many funerals. He has taught people – myself included – how to lead a congregation when one of its members dies. He's not just an insider. He's a master of the guild – just the kind of person who should write pastoral wisdom literature.

I think the genre of pastoral wisdom literature is especially good at least three things.

1. Passing on the practice. Pastoral wisdom literature cultivates not only skills, but also insight, character, and *right desire*. You can see that in every page of this book. As I read the book, I found myself wanting to get back into congregational ministry. I wanted to take up the complex work of planning a funeral. The book shapes and nurtures right pastoral desire.
2. Making judgments. Here I mean “judgment” in the most positive sense, the sense in which Aristotle used it – not as in “judgmental,” but as in “she has good judgment.” I think of “judgment” as the key pastoral virtue – like Craig's pastoral imagination, but with the normative edge highlighted. It involves attentiveness to particular situations, convictions about God's hope for the world, and the ability to bring the two together. Pastoral wisdom literature forms judgment, exercises it, and calls it forth. *Accompany Them with Singing* is the kind of book that can cultivate a pastor's judgment.

3. Remembering the big picture. While the book is always close to specific funerals on the ground, its real focus is on “the Christian funeral” as a shared and contested practice. It never forgets this big picture – and, most of all, it never forgets to think about what this practice is *for*. Pastoral wisdom literature is good at keeping these things in mind.

All genres have their limits and blind spots. Pastoral wisdom literature involves certain risks. I’d highlight two in particular. And I’d stress that I think Tom took some strong measures to avoid both of them.

1. Repeating faulty conventional wisdom. Sometimes the master of the guild can’t see what needs to come next. Guilds are, by their nature, limited. And they can become corrupt, even to the level of their ideals. It takes a deep insider to write pastoral wisdom literature, and a deep insider often misses the blind spots of the culture she is inside. Here I think of James Henley Thornwell, the nineteenth-century southern Presbyterian who was as brilliant as any author of pastoral wisdom literature our country has produced – and still utterly blind to the evils of slavery and the church’s complicity in them. His work is rightly neglected.
2. Missing the facts on the ground. Sometimes we can’t see things because we are too close to them, too involved in them. And so wisdom literature can end up describing a situation wrongly through overgeneralizations, preconceived notions, needs to vindicate the author’s own position, and more.

Ethnography

Unlike pastoral wisdom literature, ethnography is written from “outside” a culture or practice – even when an ethnographer is studying her own community, there is a need for estrangement. The methods of ethnography are all about creating and maintaining the right kind of estrangement.

I’d note three things ethnographies are especially good at:

1. Introducing us to faraway places. Ethnography has its oldest roots in studying cultures marked as “other” - and usually more primitive or exotic. It has power to cultivate sympathy across difference, to show the sense within something that at first seems very strange. I think of these ethnographies as saying, at their most basic level, “See, they really *are* human.” One good example of such a book is Tanya Erzen’s *Straight to Jesus*,

a portrait of ex-gay ministries that can win sympathy even from a room full of Vanderbilt students.

2. Estranging the nearest places. Ethnographers have increasingly turned their attention closer to home. And ethnography does have power to help us see – and inhabit – home culture differently. It estranges us, pushes us to see ourselves from outside. I think of these ethnographies as saying, at their most basic level, “You thought it was like this. But it’s like *this*.” A good example is Dawne Moon’s *God, Sex and Politics*, which is one of the best books I’ve read in years of reading in church debates about homosexuality. Moon doesn’t try to advance one side of this debate or another. She immerses herself in two Methodist congregations, studies the patterns of rhetoric within and between them, and then gives a fresh account of where the real disagreement lies, why the conversation breaks down, and how it might go forward. She holds up a critical mirror in which those of us immersed in these debates can begin to understand ourselves. Such ethnography is the remedy for common sense that has broken down. It is a disciplined form of self-reflection.
3. Testing empirical claims – Books in the practical fields, systematic theology, and ethics often depend on claims that are in fact empirical but are never tested as such. For instance, systematic theologians, scholars of liturgics, and ethicists have made a lot of claims about the power of liturgy to form people. The claims take forms like this: participation in the Eucharist changes the way we see the world and grounds patterns of consumption that can stand against the abyss of consumer society. Sounds great. Sign me up. But does that really happen? Chris Scharen tested claims like these in his *Public Worship and Public Work*. Ethnography can put these questions on the ground and evaluate them in a way no other discipline can.

Ethnography, like any other genre, runs certain risks. I want to highlight three:

1. There is a risk of losing the capacity to make constructive and normative claims. This can happen because of the intellectual difficulty of moving from fact to norm. I mean, just because they do funerals in such-and-such a way at St. John’s Abbey, why should anyone else do them that way? Indeed, why should they even do them that way at St. John’s? How do you move from description to prescription, from is to ought?

The intellectual difficulty is sharpened by the effects that reading and writing ethnography can have on a person’s character. Endlessly reporting the views of others

can be a great fig leaf for the absence of conviction or clarity about one's own beliefs. It can also allow for the slow erosion of the ability to state one's own beliefs.

(One of the many ironies of the *wissenschaftlich* university: If I myself have some piece of pastoral wisdom, then I have the wrong kind of knowledge. But if I can find some ethnographic subject to say it, and then record that subject's words as a fact – well, then, that is the right kind of knowledge. Why should a university that prizes the discovery of knowledge in some areas prize the derivative quality of knowledge in others?)

2. A second, related risk involves forming the reader as an outsider or observer. Remember that pastoral wisdom literature invites the reader to imagine herself as a pastor, and to grow into that role. Ethnography, on the other hand, invites the reader to imagine himself watching pastors and communities. That can be helpful – but too much of it can lead to or deepen alienation. (That's an empirical claim, by the way, and one some ethnographer should check.)
3. A third risk involves missing the forest for the trees. Ethnographic research requires so much care and time that it has to focus on some very small shard of space, time, and people. That narrowness is what makes the virtues possible. But it can also leave a reader thinking that she knows all about funerals in Due West, SC but nothing about funerals more broadly – let alone about how to lead one in her own location, or what she should be hoping for when she does.

A quick conclusion

I want to argue that the church and other bodies need both of these genres because we need both kinds of knowledge. Pastoral imagination is stereoscopic. It involves seeing ourselves, and our practices, both from within and without. Just as H. Richard Niebuhr wrote, we need both “internal history” and “external history,” both ethnography and pastoral wisdom literature.

One reason I'm so glad to see Tom's book is that I think truly excellent pastoral wisdom literature has been in short supply lately. All the energy has been flowing to ethnography, and not always for the best reasons. We have needed a great piece of pastoral wisdom literature. And in, *Accompany Them with Singing*, we have received one.