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Theological Ethnography As a Tool for Human Accountability

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A recent methodological approach, theological (ecclesiological) ethnography, has begun to initiate a "blurring of boundaries" between theological ethics and the social scientific methods. Advocates of this approach argue that this method creates awareness of theological and ethical innovations. It is based on the premise of the impossibility of doing good theology and ethics without the experiences of a concrete community. Furthermore, ethnography as theology and ethics makes a novel contribution that enables theological accountability and honesty, since it turns the spotlight towards the researcher and the field of theology. This happens within a framework that sees human experience and knowledge of the divine as a (1) source (embodied knowing) and (2) substance (lived practices) of theology while subjected to (3) critical self-reflexivity. This paper[1] attempts an analysis of these claims and further explores the question of whether theological ethnography is an honest process to access both human experiences and divine knowledge.

Keywords: Theology, Empirical Research, Ethnography, Ecclesiology, Praxis, Method, Accountability, Honesty, Reflexivity

1. Introduction

"Sola experiential facit theologum," meaning "experience alone makes the theologian," was Martin Luther's bold claim at the end of one of his table talks. This claim makes it understandable why the empirical dimension of

[1] A shorter version of this article was presented at the biannual European Theology Teachers' Convention at Friedensau Adventist University, Germany on April 19–22, 2017. The theme of the convention was "Human Accountability and Liberty" in commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. I am also grateful for the suggestions of the peer reviewers which improved the arguments in this article.

faith is given high priority in (practical) theology today. Recent developments show that theologians are turning to new methodologies to better understand how cultural situations and lived experiences shape the Christian faith. This is obvious in the discourses around the field of empirical theology.[2] Empirical theology seeks to combine the social scientific methods with those of theology. While this methodology has its origin in the social sciences, it is a mixed method that has constructed new theological thinking for contemporary theology. A fresh approach sees the merging of methods in ecclesiology with the social science method of ethnography. Ethnography is a process of attentive (on the ground) study of, and learning from, people (in real time and space), their practices, traditions, experiences, and places in order to understand how they make cultural, religious, and ethical meaning and what they teach us about reality, truth, beauty, moral responsibility, relationships, and the divine.[3] Ethnographic studies are mostly achieved through participant observations, interviews, artifact study, among others. For instance, Eva Keller went to Madagascar to understand what motivates people to devote so much time to Adventism and what they find attractive in it. After two years of living with Adventist families, she concludes, "It is the intellectual excitement linked to the process of studying the Bible that is the key to local people's commitment to the Adventist Church. Bible study is perceived by the local Adventists to be the road to clarity."[4]

Although Keller's quest was not theological, some theologians argue that ethnography can help answer or further theological questions or inquiry. Advocates of theological (or ecclesiological) ethnography contend that this merging of methods not only accounts for the experiential aspect of faith but also creates an avenue for theological accountability and honesty because the spotlight is turned toward the researcher or theologian. Thus, the element of critical self-reflection is embedded in the whole process. Theological ethnography is then a novel approach of constructing new theological thinking for contemporary theology.

2 This interdisciplinary method may have drawn some insights from Friedrich Schleiermacher's suggestion for the use of sociological categories in understanding the church and later advanced by the Dutch theologian Johannes van der Ven. The journal *Empirical Theology* and the numerous monographs in the field demonstrate this.

3 See Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2011), 16.

4 Eva Keller, *The Road to Clarity: Seventh-day Adventism in Madagascar* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 179. Danielle Koning, "Importing God: The Mission of the Ghanaian Adventist Church and Other Immigrant Churches in the Netherlands" (PhD diss., Vrije Universitet, 2011) is another example of an ethnographic study carried among immigrant Ghanaian Adventists.

This article briefly traces the empirical turn of theology to the social scientific method of ethnography. In addition, an analysis and critique of the claims of this approach will be problematized. To tease out the benefits of theological ethnography, two case studies will be presented to illustrate the approach as an appropriate tool for accountability. The following reflection will be based mostly on the theme of ecclesiological method with significance in the Adventist faith tradition.[5]

2. The Empirical Turn: Contours and Trajectories

2.1. To Culture and Praxis with Love

No doubt, Luther's eureka experience of God's grace was influenced by his re-reading of Romans as well as the sixteenth-century theological concern for a historical particularity of Christianity.[6] This infers that theological reflections must be done from *somewhere* in combination with a cultural specificity of a given time and place. By the mid-twentieth century, the idea that God-talk and the real world must always be closely connected led to more systematic treatment of such issues. Thus, the turns to culture[7] and concrete practices seemed to be an epistemological shift towards a critical awareness of the importance of locality, concrete cultures, narratives, and everyday experiences of lived faith. Consequently, theological inquiry naturally grew out of observations of concrete praxis, formal liturgy and ordinary experiences of real people. On practice, for example, is Don S. Browning's systematic proposal of a vision on how the churches' practice might organize theological inquiry as a whole through the engagement of social analysis.[8]

[5] Some insights in section 2 are gotten from Timothy K. Snyder, "Theological Ethnography: Embodied," *The Other Journal*, 27 May 2014, https://theotherjournal.com/2014/05/27/theological-ethnography-embodied/.

[6] See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), 62.

[7] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951) and Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959) represent turns to culture in theological studies. Later, this turn was centred more on insights from social theory and cultural studies instead of the more traditional collaboration of theology with philosophy as seen in Tanner, *Theories of Culture*.

[8] Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology? Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991).

2.2. When Empirical Studies and Theology Became Sweethearts

This theological engagement of social analysis of religious practices did spurn into an avid use of empirical methods in practical theological inquiry. This is not something new as seen in Schleiermacher's definition of the church as the community of religious emotion and theology as a positive science. As Karen Marie Leth-Nissen conceives, in Schleiermacher's view of empirical Christianity, "Man's own experience of God is all we can know of God and therefore religious experiences and emotions must be the object of theological reflections and the foundation of the church."[9] His theology therefore concentrates on the mapping of the community in its historical setting through statistical and sociological approaches.

Schleiermacher's conception was not far removed from that of Tertullian of Carthage, who earlier drafted a basis for an ecclesiological principle in his famous "ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia," meaning "where Christ is, there is the church." Scholars think that the underlying idea here is that the church is the place where Christ's taking form is proclaimed and where it happens.[10] Methodologically, this would infer that the word *God* can be understood by watching the doings of a community and its reflecting, acting, educating, and worshiping.[11] Furthermore, Tertullian's thoughts can be traced in the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer especially in *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*.[12] In his doctoral dissertation, *Sancorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer even goes further by seeking to examine the church by putting social philosophy and sociology in conversation with theology. Although he argued that Christ's church be understood sociologically and at the same time theologically, he refused to allow the social sciences "to determine his understanding of the church because it is created by God's revelation."[13] Yet, one concern that Bonhoeffer

9 Karen Marie Leth-Nissen, "Empirically Based Practical Theology and Danish Dialectical Theology: A Mutual Challenge?" *Københavns Universitet*, 9 January 2016, 3, https://teol.ku.dk/afd/afdeling-for-systematisk-teologi/?pure=da%2Fpublications%2Fempirically-based-practical-theology-and-danish-dialectical-theology-a-mutual-challenge(716b409d-5094-4455-9e7f-8e1a2aacf79b).html.

10 Pascal D. Bazzell, "Towards an Empirical-Ideal Ecclesiology: On the Dynamic Relation between Ecclesiality and Locality of the Church," *Ecclesiology* 11.2 (2015): 223.

11 Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), xii; cf. Bazzell, "Towards an Empirical-Ideal Ecclesiology," 223.

12 See André Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1971); cf. Bazzell, "Towards an Empirical-Ideal Ecclesiology," 223.

13 Bazzell, "Towards an Empirical-Ideal Ecclesiology," 226.

omitted was outlining the assumption behind his social science construct. This was the main critique on Bonhoeffer's *Sancorum Communio* by Peter L. Berger, who notes that each sociological method is based on theoretical orientations unique to its values and assumptions.[14]

In contrast, Dutch theologian Johannes (Hans) van der Ven seems conscious of the various theoretical orientations of the social science method for theological purposes as seen in his contributions in this field. For Ven, theology provides "an overall framework that incorporates the appropriate techniques and methods of the social sciences to further its own work."[15] By so doing, Ven sought to ground empirical research within theology. He contributed to the emancipation of empirical theology as a field in its own right by bringing the disciplines of practical and systematic theology into conversation with social-scientific and philosophical research.[16]

However, amidst his immense contribution, it appears that there was no real move from academic theory to concrete praxis. His dialogue with praxis remained limited since his primary discourse was of an academic nature. A dialogue with praxis needs to move a theologian from his or her writing table and preaching pulpit closer to the on-ground experiences of everyday Christians.

2.3. Ethnography as a Newfound Love

To avoid this dichotomy, there came the turn to ethnography. This turn in some theological circles can be considered as the height of the conversation between theology and the social sciences. There are mainly two ways to understand this relationship. On the one hand, scholars follow Clifford Geertz's thought of traditional and predominant use of the social sciences

[14] Ibid; cf. Peter L. Berger, "The Social Character of Question concerning Jesus Christ," in *The Place of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Martin Marty (New York: Association Press, 1962).

[15] Johannes A. van der Ven, Ecclesiology in Context (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 101. See also Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 106.

[16] For instance, in *Ecclesiology in Context*, it seems then that Ven employs a somewhat hidden four-level approach. On the level of metatheory, he follows social-scientific and philosophical theories. On the level of content, he is clearly involved in systematic theology. On the level of research, he employs empirical methods but makes less use of social scientific concepts or of the critical contribution social scientific theories might offer. On the level of praxis, Ven merges social-scientific and theological categories. A fine example of that is his book on ecclesiology. R. Ruard Ganzevoort, "Van der Ven's Empirical/Practical Theology and the Theological Encyclopaedia," in *Hermeneutics and Empirical Research in Practical Theology: The Contribution of Empirical Theology by Johannes A. van der Ven*, ed. Chris A. M. Hermans and Mary E. Moore (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 61–62.

in theology which is aimed at "thick description" of what is there. That is, the goal of research is not to confirm or prove given hypothesis but to "explore and describe as fully as possible what is—what is seen, heard, witnessed, experienced."[17] It is in such complex thick description where ethnography offers the opportunity to keep researchers honest before theological and normative conclusions are offered.[18]

On the other hand, is the playing out of the term *embodiment*. Here, proponents subscribe to an embodied research framework. In this vein, it is argued that the normative and theological conclusions come not solely from the researcher. It comes from a partnership between the researchers and their collaborators since the context of study "has embedded and embodied within its life substantive contributions to theology and ethics."[19] Put differently, "rather than paring ethnographic facts to universal theological truth, the ethnographer—through apprenticeship to the situation/people—aids in the articulation of those embedded theological convictions as primary theology itself."[20]

On this basis, theologians are embracing ethnographic methods as a way of grounding their theological work in concrete, lived experiences and in embodied ways of knowing. This is most evident in the field of ecclesiology and congregational studies.[21] A good reference point is Nicolas M. Healy's underutilized *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*. There, Healy reacts to the tendency of contemporary ecclesiology to frame its discourse through singular images, metaphors, or models.[22] Doing ecclesiology this way is what Healy refers to as "blue-print ecclesiologies," which tend to drift towards the abstract. The results are over-systematized accounts of the church distanced from concrete realities.[23]

Similarly, Roger J. Haight's magisterial trilogy[24] suggests a methodology that is faithful to the historical, social, and political reality of the church from its origins to the present. This method, "ecclesiology from below," is

17 Scharen and Vigen, Ethnography as Christian Theology, xxiii.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 For example, see Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

22 Nicolas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

23 Ibid., 25–27.

24 Roger J. Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 3 vols. (New York: Continuum, 2004–2008).

in contrast to the traditional ecclesiology from above which is abstract, idealist, and to a large extent ahistorical.

But how can ecclesiology from below be practically achieved? Healy suggests a theological-social analysis of the church or a theological form of sociology.[25] He proposes *ecclesiological ethnography* as a method that takes the local, concrete, and empirical reality of the church seriously. In Healy's vision, this method can help theologians overcome both the disconnected idealism and the undermining of the church's distinctiveness which he identifies as the twin errors of modern ecclesiology. This proposal for a distinctly theological-social analysis of the church became a stepping-stone for contemporary researchers in the conversations on theology and ethnography.[26] As a result, theoretical, practical, and theological arguments for doing theology through ethnography were constructed.[27]

3. Attempts to Harmonize the Relationship: Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank

Within the foregoing framework, some attempts were made to adequately harmonize the use of ethnography for theological purposes. However, the attempts also resulted in serious methodological and theological concerns. For instance, the quintessential question hovering over the relationship of theology and ethnography remains thus: are social sciences compatible with theology? The following will briefly look at this question from the perspectives of Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank.

3.1. Doing Durkheim with an Ecclesial Twist?

In doing ecclesiological reflections, Stanley Hauerwas struggles with what he sees as the twin temptations of presenting Christianity as a disembodied

[25] Healy, *World and Christian Life*, 8.

[26] Pete Ward, ed., *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012); Christian Scharen, ed., *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012). Brill began publishing *Ecclesial Practices: Journal of Ecclesiology and Ethnography* in 2014.

[27] For example, see Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*; Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Harald Hegstad, *The Real Church: An Ecclesiology of the Visible*, Church of Sweden Research Series 7 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013) has been described as a masterpiece in this direction. It was originally published as Harald Hegstad, *Den Virkelige Kirke: Bidrag til Ekklesiologien* (Tronheim, Norway: Tapir, 2009).

system of ideas and doing "Durkheim with an ecclesial twist."[28] Doing Durkheim (sociology) with an ecclesial twist can be nuanced in the question, why seek theological insights through illegitimate theological sources, ones that at best bracket faith and at worst deny it? For Hauerwas, "If we cannot describe theologically the significance of these activities, we will distort what we do by having to resort to descriptions and explanations all too readily provided by our culture."[29] In response, Nicholas Adams and Charles Elliott, in their programmatic article "Ethnography is Dogmatics: Making Description Central to Systematic Theology," recommend that theologians take ethnographic description as serious as dogmatics. By merging Karl Barth's dictum that ethics is dogmatics and Michael Foucault's understating that ethics is ethnography, Adams and Elliott insist that the description which Hauerwas rejects is the "medium in which dogmatics and ethnography include each other."[30] This has to be done through critical use of ethnography itself. They conclude through their fieldwork that dogmatic (theological) "ethnography pays attention to detail, but it does so eschatologically,"[31] showing how the powerless possess power for their redemption.

3.2. Ecclesiology as True Sociology?

In the vision of Milbank, social science was initiated by the Enlightenment project that attempted to restrict religion to the private sphere. This secular sphere is a social construct and a secular myth because there are no real societies. Rather, there are concrete communities and their particular histories, so there can be no general theory of society. This makes theology self-contained, standing above and against the human sciences. In fact, the only true sociology will be an ecclesiology which should be used to read society so that Christian logos and praxis can interpret or confront society in their historical particularity.[32] However, using an ecclesiological orientation to interpret the society renders Milbank's argument self-contradictory since it is a direction towards an abstract ecclesial ideal. It has been argued that the

28 Stanley Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 37. See also Nicholas Adams and Charles Elliott, "Ethnography Is Dogmatics: Making Description Central to Systematic Theology," *SJT* 53.3 (2000): 362; Todd David Whitmore, "Crossing the Road: The Case for Ethnographic Fieldwork in Christian Ethics," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27.2 (2007): 273–294.

29 Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Durham, ME: Labyrinth, 1988), 123–124.

30 Adams and Elliott, "Ethnography Is Dogmatics," 362.

31 Ibid., 364.

32 See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 422, 330, 380.

weakness of these ideal ecclesiologies can be traced to the marked influence of Platonic philosophy. Platonic philosophy idealizes the church in such a way that the failings of the church are not taken into account. Paul Avis concurs, in this framework, that ecclesiology "is commonly stated in the ideal mode. It airily evokes what the church is in the purposes of God but disdains the messy human reality. So often ecclesiology offers a 'God's eye view,' but turns a blind eye to the human aspect."[33] Thus, a theological inquiry into an ecclesiology that is not grounded will only portray a perfect nature of the church which will never be reached by the historic reality. Such ecclesiology misses the empirical reality of the church because it "misunderstands the locality of revelation present with Christ's work of reconciliation"[34] in, with, and through the church. Also, it does not facilitate an honest process in understanding itself. This is where theological ethnography comes to rescue.

4. Theology and Ethnography: Justification for the Relationship

Since the opinions of Hauerwas and Milbank create more questions than solutions, to justify the relationship of theology and ethnography, proponents turn to the values ethnography brings to theological inquiry. What follows is a brief presentation of some arguments based on ethnographic values such as humility, reflexivity, and accountability. These values constitute an argument for the use of ethnography in doing theological inquiry.

4.1. Theological Ethnography: Source (Embodied Knowing)

Epistemology, which denotes the realm of ideas and theories, explores how we human beings claim to know what we know. It also asks, how do we know truth; how do we arrive at it? Traditional theology will make use of religious doctrines, biblical studies, and ecclesial history to answer such questions, but advocates of this novel approach draw attention to the realm of human experience among the other theological sources. While some theologians acknowledge experience as a valid source, the fear of relativism is seen as a potential danger. It is argued that "if experience is given too much weight in theological analysis, claims to transcendent or universally normative truth will degenerate into biased or at least problematically limited

[33] Paul Avis, *Beyond the Reformation? Authority, Primacy and Unity in the Conciliar Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 204.

[34] Bazzell, "Towards an Empirical-Ideal Ecclesiology," 221.

visions, based on one's own preferences and encounters."[35] Consequently, letting experience function as a (central) source may lead to an "anything goes" in theology and ethics. The result will be a lack of objective criteria for measuring adequate descriptions of God.

However, experience is a multidimensional source that can be accessed through varied disciplines and mediums, not only anthropology, sociology, or personal narratives. These can include general history, sacred Scriptures, ethnography, the social sciences, theological accounts, and doctrinal reflections. In this way, individual experiences are put into a larger context. Thus, it is not simply "my experience" but the experiences of the individuals and communities: in history; over time; and as discovered through the careful study of texts, artifacts, embodied practices, living traditions, among others.[36] In essence, theological ethnography advocates do not see experience in a simplistic manner. Rather, they integrate the varied sources of knowledge for a broader understanding.

Yet experience itself is subjective. This is self-evident. So, in theological ethnography, the problem of subjectivity is not denied. Instead, it is acknowledged. By so doing, theological inquiry through this approach is honest and authentic. Honesty and authenticity are values of ethnography. While in the process of understanding the lived theological experiences in the field, the researcher is required to be an ardent learner who, despite his or her stand, is able to appreciate the quotidian and ordinary as relevant and tangible. This inculcates an objective openness to let one's theological assumptions go through an honest and transparent testing process and perhaps altering some of them.[37]

4.2. Theological Ethnography: Substance (Lived Practices)

If ethnography is a way to access both human experience and knowledge of the divine, it may be concluded that theological ethnography itself is an expression of theology because it supports an inquiry into praxis. Consequently, the empirical praxis observable during theological fieldwork will be left to speak for itself as a window to understanding an ecclesial community. This was the argument of Ernst Troeltsch that to fully understand an ecclesial community, one has to look into the everyday dialogues and

[35] Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology*, 61.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., 16.

practices of ordinary worshipers, not the ecclesiological elite.[38] It is from such praxis that relevant theology is created. Such theology "attends meaningfully to living and historically rooted traditions, the gospel, and to contemporary human events, practices and needs."[39] Instead of letting all theological reflection begin from a full-blown doctrine of the church, the theological praxis, such as concrete dilemmas, are analyzed and interpreted because theology does not emerge in or from a vacuum. Similarly, Luther's theological visions were also rooted in the concrete, practical questions and cries of sixteenth-century Saxony. In essence, the fact that concrete encounters inspire theological creation makes the inquiry into praxis itself a substance of theology.

4.3. Theological Ethnography: Self-Critical Awareness and Accountability

Honesty in understanding oneself (self-awareness) leads to taking responsibility of one's choices, behaviors, and actions (accountability). This further entails a process of accountable actions, critiquing oneself, seeking improvement, and letting others correct him or her. With theological ethnography, self-awareness is imperative. This process results in critical awareness where theological reflection insists on a critical examination of the scholar's preconceptions and assumptions. As a result, the scholar owns up to limits and embodied subjectivity. This self-aware stance helps guard against creating a purportedly perfected system of theological thought.

Theology itself supports this by acknowledging the fact that there are limits and frailties in any theological creation. Thus, our understandings of revelation, the divine, and transcendent truth is not final but partial. Ethnography also does not claim an attempt to "tidy the messy contradictions it may find or create a false sense of unity, homogeneity, synthesis. Instead, it is necessarily open to finding disconnects, ruptures, and paradox—indeed, it expects them."[40] On this basis, theological ethnographers do not need to be "all seeing" or "all knowing" to offer relevant reflections. Rather, they can offer as valid the partial insights they gain "through situating themselves in particular contexts, listening thoughtfully to others, reflecting upon their own lives, emotional responses, and even internal biases."[41]

[38] Ernst Troeltsch, "The Dogmatics of the 'Religionsgeschichtliche Schule'," *The American Journal of Theology* 17.1 (1913): 1–21, quoted in Ulrich Schmiedel "Praxis or Talk about Praxis? The Concept of Praxis in Ecclesiology," *Ecclesial Practices* 3.1 (2016): 127, 133.

[39] Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology*, 65.

[40] Ibid., 69.

[41] Ibid.

According to Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, "Such a posture is not only essential for methodological credibility; it is also a way to model intellectual and spiritual humility. In a word: transparency."[42] This humility suggests the limits of both theological reasoning on one hand and ethnographic observation on the other hand.

Let me give a practical example from my fieldwork in Nigeria. I am a PhD student interested in understanding how Adventists in Nigeria construct theology.[43] When I wrote my proposal, I was so sure (as a Nigerian) that I will find implicit theologies by observing the practices of Sabbath school Bible study, child dedication, holy communion, and foot washing. For me, the ecclesial praxis of these liturgies in some congregations will suffice to interpret Nigerian Adventism. With such conviction, I was set for fieldwork, but my readings suggested I do a pre-field study before the actual fieldwork. Thus, I went to Nigeria for a four-week-long fieldwork.

During this period and after I came back, my whole body of assumptions was changed. I found out that the Nigerian Adventists I had conceived did not exist. Instead of the praxis which I had lined up for observation, my tentative findings show that to understand Adventism in Nigeria, I needed to also take prayers, testimonies and prayer requests, church board meetings, and their understanding of the phrase *Adventist heritage* more seriously. Indeed, in my analysis, I am acknowledging that I was wrong. Therefore, theology cannot be based on the empirical evidence alone nor should theoretical reason take central significance. Both are needed to test and confront assumptions in any theological reflection and inquiry. This is where critical reflection takes credence.

5. Constructing God-Talk That Is Accountable to Its Context through Theological Ethnography

Actually, "critical-self-reflection provides not only a way to check for preconceptions and blinders, it helps teach us to be human—imperfect, embodied, a member of a larger community that calls us to accountability, to relationship."[44] Moreover, by paying more attention to what exists—in embodied practices, in community—theological ethnography offers a method

[42] Ibid. See also Pete Ward, "Ecclesiology and Ethnography with Humility: Going through Barth," *ST* 72.1 (2018): 1–17.

[43] This ongoing PhD study at Vrije Universitet, Amsterdam is titled "Seventh-day Adventism in Nigeria: Ecclesiological Praxis of a Prophetic Community."

[44] Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology*, 71.

for heeding Luther's call to "honor God's handiwork"[45] and take the empirical process seriously. Honoring God's handiwork calls for an honest and accountable process where contemporary theologizing speaks to a suffering world as well as expressing solidarity with those who are in need and are hurting. If so, theological ethnography is even an instrument for witnessing. Based on the foregoing discussion, I now proceed to present some outlines of theological inquiry that are accountable to its context. Two illustrations will suffice.

5.1. Source for Accountability: Embodied Knowing and Local Epistemologies

Generally, in Nigeria, myths or narratives have played an important role in understanding the metaphysics and epistemology of people. I suggest through theological ethnography the following: a theology of death and resurrection can be set in an anthropological narrative that seeks to explain the nature of humanity. For instance, in various traditional narratives, human in Igbo anthropology has four constituent principles: *obi*, *chi*, *eke*, and *mmuo*. *Obi* ("heart or breath") is seen as "man's animating principle and the seat of affection and volition."[46] The Igbo believe that the "breath," not the heart, is an immaterial spiritual substance which can leave the body sometimes, especially when frightened or under the influence of witchcraft. "This breath is a life force which links man with other cosmic forces."[47] *Chi* is believed to be the Creator's emanation. *Chi* is conceived of as a spirit double—one dwells in heaven, the other in the individual. When a person dies, his or her *chi* goes back to God to give account for his or her work and conduct.

Furthermore, *chi* is seen as "a personalized providence from God. It is a spark of divine being given by God to man. Chi is a person's spiritual counterpart."[48] *Eke*, the ancestral guardian, is "believed to be an ancestral shade

[45] Martin Luther, *The Estate of Marriage (1522)*, vol. 45 of *Luther's Works*, American ed., trans. Walther I. Brandt (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 17, quoted in Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology*, 73.

[46] Emefie Ikenga Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion: A Case Study of the Igbo of Nigeria* (London: Chapman, 1981), 87; cf. Edmund Ilogu, *Christianity and Ibo Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 44.

[47] Metuh, *God and Man*, 88.

[48] Francis Anyika, "The Chi Concept in Igbo Religious Thought," *CV* 31.4 (1988): 218. Edmund Ilogu argues that because of the *chi*, a person has a share in the Supreme Being which makes him or her immortal. Therefore, a person is conceived in a more spiritual sense than in a biological one. Ilogu, *Christianity and Ibo Culture*, 41.

incarnate in each newly born baby."[49] This aspect of humans is connected to the concept of reincarnation in Igboland.[50] *Mmuo* or *onyinyo* ("spirit or shadow") is what survives after death. This is not part of the person but the full, real person. *Mmuo* is directly created by God and pre-exists its appearance in human form. During a person's lifetime and even after his or her death, *mmuo* "is imagined as being like a shadow cast by the human body."[51] This anthropological understanding fuels the idea that the dead are living somewhere in their *structures of existence*.[52]

Contrarily, Adventists' understanding in biblical monism[53] sees a human being as a constituent whole.[54] It is then expedient to transform this thinking through continuity in the biblical fall narrative. This can be done by developing a biblical theology in the Igbo context that takes the four constituent principles or components of a human being in the Igbo worldview seriously. This does not seek to interpret the absolute biblical truth of death with culture, a relative and changing element. Rather, this seeks to honestly move from the known to the unknown in order to achieve

49 Emefie Ikenga Metuh, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes* (Onitsha, Nigeria: Imico, 1991), 112.

50 Ibid.

51 Metuh, *God and Man*, 89.

52 I came in contact with this phrase in the work of Kwabena Donkor, who used it in understanding and developing a biblically informed "sociology of ancestors." "Structures of existence are simply those arrangements of human social interaction (e.g., the state, financial systems, social norms, etc.) that condition their existence. Placing the subject of ancestors in the study of structures of existence means ancestor cult should be approached as one of the dimensions of reality that condition the individual and the corporate existence of many African peoples." Kwabena Donkor, Ancestor Worship, Biblical Anthropology, and Spiritualistic Manifestations in Africa," in *The Church, Culture and Spirits: Adventism in Africa* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2011), 85. "As a structure of existence, the ancestor cult has to some extent, shaped the world of Africans. It is part of their identity." Ibid. 86.

53 Neils-Erik A. Andreasen writes, "Here by the Bible indicates that the life-breadth does not represent a second entity, added, like an ingredient, to the body, capable of separate existence, but an emerging power from God that transformed the earthen body into a living being." Neils-Erik A. Andreasen, "Death: Origin, Nature, and Final Eradication," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 314–346.

54 God created Adam with the dust of the ground and breathed in him the breath of life, making him a living being or soul. This breath of God is also the soul and is able to die as a result of sin. Thus, when a person dies, the breath, soul, or spirit ceases to function in reverse of humanity's creation. Hence, a person does not know anything in death and ceases to exist. See Aecio E. Cairus, "The Doctrine of Man," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, 205–232.

a transformation. Thus, a theological narrative of death will follow anthropo-cosmic lines, taking elements from Igbo anthropology. Elements such as the four components of a human being (for example) may only be used where there is agreement with biblical anthropology. This means that to be faithful to Scripture, the four components of a human being should be incorporated into biblical monism instead of adapting Scripture to them.

5.2. Source for Accountability: Lived Practices

While doing ethnography among Seventh-day Adventists in Nigeria, I noticed a unique contestation in relation to Adventist missionary traditions and worship practices. During my ethnographic study, I had to critically assess the situation. This led me to an awareness that the kind of contestation towards the past worship praxis combined with the acceptance or rejection of cultural ethos in the worship arena shows the diverse nature of Adventism and the emergence of a neo-Adventist ecclesiology. Fortunately, it was possible to come to this deduction through Haight's vision of "ecclesiology from below."[55]

"Ecclesiology from below" means accounting for the empirical (the loved practices) as well as the theological. In other words, it is theological reflection on carefully described empirical observations using an ethnographic framework and attending to the local ecology of faith in the ecclesial arena. This can be achieved by using historical (denominational tradition) and sociological (the social forces that act upon a church as an organization) categories that focus on concrete local practices of a particular Adventist community, since practices[56] are both theological and sociological.[57]

A similar approach to ecclesiology from below has been propounded by the late African philosopher Pantaleon Iroegbu as Umunna ecclesiology, using the philosophy of communal living among Igbos of Nigeria to construct an ecclesiology from below. Iroegbu opines,

> 'Umunna Ecclesiology' or ecclesiology from below is appropriate ecclesiology. This is because in it, the realism of the below concretizes the idealism of the above. At the end, both aspects combine to give us the

[55] This is following the work of Haight, *Christian Community in History*.

[56] In the course of the research, I will make an elaboration on the various frames of congregational practices: scripted practices, unstructured practices, rationalizing practices, conferring practices, maintenance practices, and transitional practices. See James Nieman, "Attending Locally: Theologies in Congregations," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 6.2 (2002): 201–207.

[57] See Clare Watkins et al., "Practical Ecclesiology: What Counts as Theology in Studying Church," in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 177.

> ultimate understanding of the church. Methodologically it has the advantage of being more real, relevant and existential than an authoritarian transcendentalist or bourgeois ecclesiology.[58]

Iroegbu argues that Umunna ecclesiology or ecclesiology from below does not deny nor exclude ecclesiology from above. Rather, "it recognizes the transcendental and hierarchical aspects of ecclesia. But its specificity is that it does not start from these. It starts from realities closest to us: the human, the natural, the common, our stories. It starts from below. But it does not end below. It travels upwards."[59]

If the above is taken seriously, then in constructing a Nigerian remnant Adventist ecclesiology, the contestation between preservation and innovation of Adventist tradition will be of prime importance. Such ecclesiology may encourage an innovation of Adventist ecclesiological traditions to fit the religious and social contexts of Nigeria. At the same time, it advocates historical consciousness, that is, making use of elements of Adventist missionary traditions or Adventist heritage. Furthermore, such ecclesiology "can elevate the functional status of the faithful via its global concern for the subsidiarity role of all the members as participators in integral Belongingness"[60] instead of the perpetuation of an exclusive mentality and identity.

6. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated a novel contribution to the recent use of the social scientific method of ethnography for theological inquiry. The process involves an empirical turn to culture—concrete realities and embodied experiences where ethnography serves as a tool for understanding human experiences and knowledge of the divine. By showing how theological ethnography can be a tool for human accountability, the article argued for humility, reflexivity, and responsibility to the quotidian contextual issues of everyday realities of God's handiwork. This was demonstrated with two cases of Igbo local epistemology and Nigerian Adventist Church life.

However, the pitfalls of theological ethnography were not underscored. This was not the goal of the article. Therefore, while the insights explored in this essay are preliminary, further engagement must underscore the drawbacks of ethnography in theological inquiry as it relates theology in general and in a particular faith tradition. Yet, it must be maintained here that the world with its complexities forces theology to step outside of its

[58] Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Appropriate Ecclesiology: Through Narrative Theology to an African Church* (Owerri, Nigeria: International Universities Press, 1996), 100.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

"ivory towers" into the action and quotidian experiences of the people of God. In doing so, researchers and reflections not only extend hands of fellowship to their social context but they also stand the chance of honestly engaging issues and becoming accountable to the two-way conversation generated thereof.