



*Journal of
Religion & Society*
Supplement Series

The Kripke Center

Supplement 11 (2015)

Religion and the Sciences

Opportunities and Challenges

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins and Thomas M. Kelly

5. Data-Driven Religion

Empirical Thinking in Theological Inquiry

Donna Bowman, University of Central Arkansas

Experience in Theology

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral delineates four traditional sources for theological thinking: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience (Outler: 16). Of the four, it is experience that deserves to be considered the most fundamental. The other three sources all originate in it, and are bounded by it. Scripture records historical experience, and cements and codifies certain reflections on that experience; it also serves as a backdrop, a criterion, or perhaps at times a framework for the interpretation of our experience in the present. Tradition transmits historical experience, creating contexts and settings (perhaps with built-in boundaries and limitations) for present-day experience and interpretation. Reason is the arena in which, and the methodology by which, we engage in reflection and interpretation of those scripturally and traditionally transmitted experiences, as well as our present experience.

It is important to keep in mind that experience is also a source of theology, and not simply a mill through which the other sources must pass in order to have theology made out of them. The ongoing role of experience as not only a medium, filter, or portal, but also as a source in and of itself, indicates that novelty in theology is still (theoretically, at least) welcomed. Granted, it may be most acceptable in the context of – or perhaps within the boundaries set by – the other three sources, but given the accelerating pace of change that separates our lived experience in the twenty-first century from those of previous eras, this opening to novelty seems critical. Moreover, the status of experience as a source in its own right provides a harbor, within theological thinking, for other contexts that figure in our experience but are difficult to reduce to language, historical memory, or reason; embodied existence is one example of such a context. Sometimes theologians have managed to apply these other contexts of experience deliberately and systematically, as Paul Tillich did in his “theology of culture,” and as various politically-inflected theological movements have done in the last half century. On a broader, less pervasive level, theologians might, on an ad hoc basis, pluck bits of data out of our personal or common experience to spark their reflections. For example, it is commonplace for theological examination to be prompted by large cultural shifts, such as that induced by the 9/11 terror attacks.

Historically, the experience that counted in theology was the experience of the theologian himself (the gender-specific pronoun is used advisedly). This meant that the experiences that became part of the corpus of theological reflection had the following specific characteristics: They were the experiences of cultural elites (primarily European males, after the fall of Rome); and they were the experiences of individuals who were empowered by a specific profession to generalize and universalize, from a vantage point whose limitations went unrecognized, their particular contexts. When a desire emerged to hear other theological voices and to take into account other experiences, efforts in this regard largely were confined to opening up the profession to different kinds of people. If the experiences of non-whites, non-males, and non-Europeans are needed, then platforms must be provided to professional theologians from under-represented groups, such as women and people of color. To correct the overgeneralization of a small range of experience, people with different characteristics have been asked to generalize from their experience.

Relatively few projects have focused on the problem of limited experience in theology from its other fork: the restriction of relevant experience to that of professional theologians. Equally rare is the strategy of incorporating a range of experiences through systematic data collection, rather than ad hoc selectivity. One effort that embraced both these methods was the Ordinary Theology Project (NEICE), spearheaded by Jeff Astley and housed at the North of England Institute for Christian Education, which disbanded in April 2013. By “ordinary theology,” Astley and his colleagues mean the theological ideation of non-professionals, specifically (for this purpose) lay people in the Church of England. Two considerations decisively shaped this project’s inputs and outputs. The first is the theological thinking of lay-people – namely, to analyze the roles played in their thinking by their formal religious education. The second, the underlying principle or assumption behind the search for insight about the effect of religious education precisely here, among these informants – namely, is the conviction that the meanings understood and generated by laypeople about religious language, practice, and experience *count as theology*.

In the current academic landscape, ordinary theology is treated as a subtopic of practical theology. This makes sense when the motivations for investigating meanings held by non-professionals are related to the functioning of the religious communities in which they participate. Astley and the NEICE group wanted to assess and understand religious education as it was practiced in the Church of England, and addressed this problem by looking at that education's "outcomes" in the community's members, which entailed quizzing them about their conceptions of religious ideas and doctrines. (One of the handful of books produced by the Ordinary Theology Project focused, for example, on the Christological concepts discovered among those interviewed.) Uses for such investigations can be readily imagined in the confessional realm. Many pastors are interested in using data, either collected anecdotally, derived from denominationally-sponsored research, or found in surveys done by non-profit organizations (such as the Pew Foundation), to shape their educational and evangelistic efforts. It is understandable that those on the front lines of parish ministry would be interested in using data about the mistaken or heterodox theologies held by non-professionals in order to formulate corrective measures.

Theology, Religious Studies, and Data

In this paper, I argue that the systematic theologian should be interested in gathering and/or utilizing data about the theologies generated, consciously and unconsciously, by adherents with no special theological training. To begin, allow me to differentiate this claim from two others that seem, at first glance, to be related.

First, this thesis is not equivalent to the general position that the field of religious studies needs to practice and/or utilize social scientific methods. Such methods have made their way into religious studies as part of a long-standing and well-established movement toward grounding the field in data. Scholars involved in the social scientific study of religion give us indispensable information about what people do and believe in their religious lives. They help us understand religious communities and populations as they grow, wane, change, solidify, and dissolve. These methods also connect broad areas of human experience to the study of religion proper (and in some extreme cases, reduce the study of religion to a poorly-defined subset of general anthropology). What this set of methodologies do not concern themselves with, however, is the coherence and significance of meanings in the religious realm. The theologian's central concern for such matters means that my claim does not reduce to simple advocacy of social scientific methods in religious studies.

Second, my contention here should be distinguished from advocacy for the psychological study of religion. Unlike the social scientific methods mentioned above, psychological investigation does often deal with meanings that are held by human beings and that become operative in human action. It investigates not only the details of those meanings, but also how the meanings are held, their significance for the individuals that hold them, and their coherence with other thoughts and behaviors. However, unlike theology, psychology of religion remains neutral or agnostic about the placement of these meanings in a larger, communally-inflected framework of meanings that express, explain, and interpret relationships to the ultimate.

Theologians, by contrast, take coherent, useful meanings as their *raison d'être*. Consider John MacQuarrie's compact definition of theology: "the study which, through participation

in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available” (1). Unpacked a bit further, the theologian’s mandate is:

1. unpack meanings from the “givens” (sources, such as those delineated in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral);
2. repack them into a framework, writ large (systematics) or small (phenomenology);
3. thus making them useful (available for understanding),
4. and fruitful (available for action, including the action of further thinking).

Underlying the field of ordinary theology, as previously described, is the principle that *everyone who engages with religious practice or ideas does this*, at some level. The question that next arises for self-conscious theologians is whether the unsystematic and ad hoc way in which it is done by the untrained holds any interest to the professional or to others who consider theology important.

This question is reminiscent of the debate between descriptive and prescriptive grammarians, fought most fervently and publicly in the mid-twentieth century (cf. Hudson and Walmsley). Grammar is something we are taught to extract from our lived language, and then express in terms of structures put together by rules. It has long been understood that the rules follow from the functional imperative to be understood by people with whom we share a language (and to be adept at utilizing language for reasons other than simple conceptual transmission, e.g., as a social marker), rather than existing as a standard to which language must adhere for essentialist reasons. However, a *purely descriptive* grammar is of merely encyclopedic interest. The task of rendering language into principles and rules is not done in the interest of simply knowing what those principles are, but also in the interest of making language users aware of them in order to improve their chances of successfully communicating. Grammar, then, is not merely a record of the structures that have evolved, but is an elucidation of them. This means that it also functions as a way of parsing conflicts, in the interest of rendering those structures useful.

Similarly, ordinary theology could be, and has been, pursued as an encyclopedic process, uncovering, recording, and mulling over the natural history of theological meanings among the laity. However, I doubt that the theologian *qua* theologian will be much interested in that project, except perhaps as it provides another storehouse of ad hoc bits we may pluck to spark our theological reflections. A simple compendium will suffice if the reason for interest in ordinary theology is to allow clergy and other religious elites to tsk-tsk over the state of lay understanding in their own communities, but again, this seems marginal to the task of theology that I have outlined.

Especially in the constructive process, and especially if we are theologians for the church, we need to pay attention to the creative process in which people lacking formal training make useful meaning out of what they receive and put it to work in their congregations and in their spiritual practice. We need to pay attention to this because that process *reflects and reveals their experience*. What cultural or moral values they consider non-negotiable, how they navigate and prioritize creedal affirmations, what their work or family

or social life teaches them about the divine: these are the fruits of experience. They emerge in the seams, cracks, tensions, buttresses, and outbuildings that lay people build onto the theologies they are taught by professional religious people.

Theology and Empiricism

Although the title of this essay promises discussion of “empirical thinking,” so far we have not entered the realm of science – although we are milling around on the porch of the Gentiles, so to speak, by talking about data. So far we have only said that the experience of a wider range of people would be a good thing for theology to include as a source, and that it is not enough to wait until a wider range of people become professional theologians. Let us take this one step further, and consider whether empirical thinking or empirical evidence *per se* has a place in theology.

The barrier to the inclusion of empirical evidence in theology arises from the philosophical position of empiricism, which prioritizes observational evidence as the foundation for claims of truth (Markie). Do we theologians want to be in a position – or can we be in a position – where we must appeal to a collection of sensory impressions in order to justify a theological claim? This seems backwards when we compare long-established practice. Typically, we make theological claims on a rationalistic basis, and then append observation as support or validation.

However, many people concerned with religious meaning have long noted a problem with professional theology. The grammar analogy, once again, proves helpful: If the meanings that people actually use drift further and further away from the meanings professional religious people assert, then we theologians are constructing fantasy grammars for languages that long ago died. So one reason to embrace empirical evidence in theology is to hold theologians to some standard of relevance – at least those theologians who have institutional or personal missions to be relevant to communities of faith and those who care about them.

Another reason is to ground the important theological notion of credibility (cf. Ogden) in some empirically accessible realm. Credibility moves beyond logical consistency into a realm circumscribed and defined by contemporary culture. As members of that culture, individual theologians are certainly authorized to make credibility judgments. But our judgments will be better if we utilize ordinary theology to gather multiple perspectives. What seems perfectly in the mainstream of credibility to me, with my theological education, might be something many lay people find problematic and distorted. Credibility is a standard that properly applies at the community level; the criterion gains meaning only in reference to an audience that identifies with a certain tradition, whose members have in common a sense of the problems to be solved by the theological proposal, and are able to assess the applicability of the solution proposed. While no guarantee of success in crafting credible theology, the effort to discover (through empirical investigation) something concrete about the audience's framework of meaning seems indispensable as a starting point.

Of course, a decision to engage in systematic data collection of the theological perspectives of others raises a host of subsequent issues. The relationship between the language a person might use to describe her experience, and the private inner world in which

that experience occurred, is hardly simple. Perhaps, as Wittgenstein held, the data a theologian collects by asking people about their understandings is nothing more or less than a record of utterances set within a system of rules (42). Yet the theologian convinced of the moral imperative to hear other voices is not without resources. The development of qualitative research techniques in the social sciences offers an opportunity to move forward under a set of phenomenological assumptions. These methods posit as their starting point the notion that “the knower and the known are interdependent.” The goal sought by qualitative research is to “discover or uncover propositions” (Maykut and Morehouse: 12). Such an approach to data collection is consistent with the professional intuitions that drive the theologian in this direction – that others must be listened to, in order to expose what is lacking in the theologian herself. Moreover, it treats those others as “the final authority on how their own worlds work” (McCutcheon: 201), a stance of humility, while nevertheless “find[ing] patterns within those words (and actions) and . . . present[ing] those patterns for others to inspect” (Maykut and Morehouse: 18), consistent with the theologian’s role as analyst and communicator.

Empirical Inquiry in Theological Practice

What might data-driven theology look like in practice? I would like to offer some firsthand observations on methodology arising from my own efforts to apply these principles to a theological project. In the last few years I developed an interest in the kinds of theological meanings that arise from handmaking activity. The phenomenon known as “prayer shawl ministry” suggested itself as an ideal site for discovering such meanings. Prayer shawl ministries – groups of knitters and crocheters, usually based in a church, who make wraps to be given to the ill and bereaved – have a relatively short history (arising in the late 1990s), occur across a wide range of denominations, spring from a few identifiable texts and sources, and develop autonomously in response to local conditions, needs, and desires. Beginning in spring 2013 and continuing into early 2014, I interviewed almost one hundred women who participate in prayer shawl ministry groups in the United States, asking them about their personal, religious, and handcrafting histories, the structure and process of the group in which they participate, their motivation for engaging in this work, their understanding of the spiritual significance of the prayer shawl, and their hopes, dreams, and fears for their ministry. Using qualitative techniques, I identified several themes emerging from the data, noting distinctions and nuances arising from specific circumstances. In a book scheduled for publication with Lexington Press, I hope to develop a complex picture of the theologies that precipitate from this specific instance of religiously-inflected handmaking. Starting with a close reading of the ordinary theologies of the interviewees, the book will proceed toward a synthesis informed by more formal (academic and institutional) Christian thought.

At one level, this project is empirical. I want to know what theological meanings are expressed by those who engage in this activity, and the way to find out is to ask them. As noted above, the collection of these meanings could conceivably be valuable in and of itself as a dataset. With some attention to flexibility of presentation and manipulation, the data could be used to tease out all sorts of aggregate and comparative information about prayer shawl ministries: their participants, their structure, their relationship to the congregations

that engender or host them, and their distinctiveness in relation to similar handcrafting and caretaking endeavors that lack explicit spiritual underpinnings.

At a second level, this is a project of practical theology. In other words, it has the potential to assess what theological meanings are *useful for people as they do their work*. This is a natural rationale for collecting empirical data on theology. It is the motivation for the NEICE Ordinary Theology Project mentioned above; the researchers there wished to understand the reception of religious education in England. The native fit of such data collection with functional assessment of theological initiative accounts for the placement of ordinary theology as a subset of practical theology in most classification schemes.

At a third level, this is a project of systematic theological imagination. My aim in gathering this data goes beyond learning what these women think. It even goes beyond a desire to empower them, structurally and ideologically, within their churches and communities. I aim, through this process, to better understand Christian theology.

The empirical method of this project yields information for the theologian that is not simply information about the subjects studied, but is also about the theological task itself. As an example of this process, I will mention a theme that is emerging from the data as I work through it. If it turns out that a broad mandate for inclusivity, with a corresponding rejection of judgment and sin as critical theological categories, exists across a wide range of prayer shawl ministry participants and contexts, then something about what is central and what is marginal in an adequate theology for this situation has been discerned. This may seem obvious, and it may be obvious to the theologian with the whole sweep of possible Christian priorities and meanings to put into some order. But it is far from obvious that, even where Christian communities assert this article of faith and purport to put it into practice, it actually becomes the agenda and the framework for spontaneous lay activity. It is far from obvious that this theme flows strongly in evangelical, mainstream, and emerging churches alike, given the differences in the way these groups prioritize doctrine. In fact, many congregations and denominations hedge or reverse this particular theological assertion; its appearance as a framework for (or result of) lay ministry in these contexts seems particularly telling.

These discoveries – not just intuitions, but arising from and supported by data – become the basis for systematic construction. I aim through this empirical process to build a better theology. And of course, the ultimate aim of constructive theology is to understand Christianity itself, and through Christianity, to understand the relationship of human existence to ultimate things. We do not stop with what these women have to tell us, any more than we stop with scripture or tradition. We contemplate these sources using reason and (I would add) synthetic imagination to draw together a coherent and comprehensive system of meaning and ideation.

A theology of the prayer shawl ministry takes its place alongside the theology of the pulpit, the theology of the monastery, the theology of the university, the theology of the seminary, and the theology of the political or social movement. All of these are better known and more widely disseminated; a student or practitioner of theology could be forgiven for regarding them as ideal methodological exemplars. Yet in most cases they are experientially impoverished, compared to the theology that starts with deliberate collection of data. Why should the theology of the prayer shawl ministry – the theology that begins with the

experience of a hundred lay women, most over 60 years old, many mothers, widows, grandparents, divorcees, wives, same-sex partners, foster parents, working with their hands to offer tangible evidence of the divine presence – not stand beside these famous theologies, not only as a corrective or as a new voice to hear, but as a rich expression of living, thinking, being as a Christian that can illuminate any faith journey?

I am inspired by the research done by Bonnie Marie Thurston, Kerstin Aspegren, and Stevan L. Davies on the widows of 1 Timothy, whose central position in the church was usurped (I use the strong term advisedly) by male leaders anxious to present the Christian community to its Hellenistic environment as non-radical and non-threatening. It is possible that the widows pushed back by creating hagiographies of independent female teachers and leaders martyred for their faithfulness, works we now know as the apocryphal Acts. These women argued that their experience of the gospel of Jesus Christ was not marginal, but central, not heretical, but more faithful than the patriarchal version promulgated by clergy. Down in the fellowship halls, over in the classrooms and supply closets, out in the homes where they meet to knit and crochet, I have found them still arguing it. Anyone with a professional or personal concern for empowering, prophetic, faithful, strong frameworks for religious thought and action should open the windows of their theological towers and listen.

Bibliography

Aspegren, Kerstin

- 1990 *The Male Woman: A Feminine Ideal in the Early Church. Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis*, Uppsala Women's Studies, Women in Religion 4. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International.

Astley, John

- 2002 *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening, and Learning in Theology*. Burlington: Ashgate.

Davies, Stevan L.

- 1980 *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Hudson, Richard, and John Walmsley

- 2005 "The English Patient: English Grammar and Teaching in the Twentieth Century." *Journal of Linguistics* 41, 3: 593-622.

McCutcheon, Russell T.

- 2012 "I Have a Hunch." Pp. 199-202. *Religious Experience: A Reader*. Edited by Craig Martin and Russell T. McCutcheon. Bristol: Equinox.

MacQuarrie, John

- 1977 *Principles of Christian Theology*. Second edition. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Markie, Peter

- 2013 "Rationalism vs. Empiricism." The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2013 Edition). Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Available

online at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/rationalism-empiricism/>.

Maykut, Pamela, and Richard Morehouse

1994 *Beginning Qualitative Research: A Philosophic and Practical Guide*. Washington D.C.: Falmer.

Ogden, Schubert

1986 *On Theology*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Outler, Albert C.

1985 "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley." *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20, 1: 7-18.

Thurston, Bonnie Bowman

1989 *The Widows: A Women's Ministry in the Early Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Tillich, Paul C.

1969 "On the Idea of a Theology of Culture." In *What Is Religion?* Edited by James Luther Adams. New York: Harper & Row.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig

1965 *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Study for the "Philosophical Investigations."* New York: Harper.