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Author(s): James V. Spickard

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JAMES V. SPICKARD

University of Redlands

SLOW JOURNALISM? ETHNOGRAPHY AS A MEANS OF
UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS SOCIAL ACTIVISM

When I was invited to give this talk, my first reaction was “why me”? As a rather obscure and not very orthodox sociologist of religion from a second-tier West Coast teaching college, I wondered what I could contribute to your discussions. True, I had just edited a book on reflexive ethnography in the study of religion,¹ in which I was able to say some things that everybody knows – or ought to know if they think about them. My contributions to that volume has been combined with some epistemological musings and some rank speculation, which made sense to me at the time but which may or may not prove to be true. Your director, Rachel McCleary, seemed interested in that book rather than in my other work, so I have prepared something similar for you today. Given the time, I shall limit myself to deductions from the obvious and to epistemological musings – each taken a few intellectual steps beyond what I wrote nearly two years ago. You will have to decide for yourselves whether these cross over into rank speculation, though I don’t think they do. At any rate, I hope my remarks will prove worth the time that we are spending here this afternoon. I also hope they will encourage you to kick the social study of religion a bit farther in the direction that I think it ought to go.

I. THE OBVIOUS

The question I wish to pose is this: What makes ethnography more than just slow journalism in the study of religion? Specifically, what does ethnography have to offer the kind of transnational, macro-level study of religion that takes place at the Weatherhead Center? The obvious answer would seem to be “not much.”

A visit to the Center’s web site finds talk of “cross-country data sets,” society-wide promotion of religious “values and behaviors,” questions of whether “religiosity decline[s] as societies become richer and better educated,” and the like. All of these are macro-level questions; ethnography is notoriously concerned with micro-level processes. What can it hope to contribute?

A similar impression arises from scanning the list of “working papers.” Though some are case-based, most seem to seek a relatively high degree of

¹ James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire, eds, *Beyond Personal Knowledge: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion* (New York: NYU Press, 2002).

generalizability. What can ethnography – that resolutely local, often apparently subjective and certainly partial approach to social life – contribute?

One of the classic joys of the anthropological life, after all, is being able to swat generalizers by saying, “Such talk is all very fine, but that’s not how they do things among the Mundugamor (or Tallensi or Jivaro or Brooklynners).” How can such episodic explorations help us understand religion (with a big “R”) in a transnational era? How does it help us relate big-R religion to big-L law, big-E economics, big-P politics, and the like?

The answer is by no means clear, and once we start to question ethnography’s potential contribution here, things get bad rather quickly. The title of my talk today captures one facet of this problem: the fact that ethnography is often little more than journalism without deadlines.

I first heard the term “slow journalism” from Rod Stark, who used it to disparage the small-scale, non-generalizing reporting-from-odd-places that passes for ethnography among most sociologists of religion. Ethnography is journalism, claims the phrase, because it focuses on particulars. It tells us what happens in such and such a place and in such and such a time.

But it does not generalize beyond that place and time – or at least it does not obviously do so. The term privileges theory in social science – and particularistic ethnography produces little of that. To call scholarship “journalism” is to say that it is not worth-while science.

Moreover, by calling ethnography *slow* journalism, the phrase highlights the fact that ethnographers can spend lots of years finding out very little. Pull away the talk of “habitus” and “postmodern moments,” of “representation” and “discourses” from more than a few research projects, and one is left with a story that would take a good reporter a couple of months to complete. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, in too much so-called ethnography, there is little there there.

I shall present an epistemological counter-attack in due time, but, frankly, the term fits too many ethnographies of religion. One reason is a hidden parallel between reporting and sociological ethnography, imbedded in the latter’s origins.

Sociological ethnography grew out of the Chicago settlement house movement, as an attempt to figure out how poor immigrants could be turned into members of the middle class. To change them, one had to know them; hanging out on street corners and talking to the people there proved a pretty effective way to learn how they ticked. This was good reportage.

Much first-world ethnography tells us what marginal peoples think, how they live, why they do what they do. By taking us inside their heads, it removes their “otherness,” so we – and by this, I mean the educated middle and upper-middle classes – are thus more willing to see them as potentially “us.”

We embed this in our pedagogical practice, for most introductory sociology courses similarly seek to make marginalized “others” familiar. Good teachers rightly turn to works by journalists such as Jonathan Kozol, Alex Kotlowitz, or Adrian Nicole LeBlanc,² preferring their well-written accounts of poor people to sociological tomes that are drier without much better insight.

Among works on religion, few ethnographies surpass journalist Jon Krakauer’s recent exposé of Mormon Fundamentalists, though James Aho’s excellent work on Idaho Christian patriots is no less worthy.³ Both take us inside the minds of their informants; both confront us with troubling judgments. Shouldn’t the scientist be doing a significantly better job?

Of course, journalists do not always get it right. In a brilliant review of the literature on Appalachian snake-handling churches, Jim Birkhead shows how non-ethnographic accounts of this marginal religion construct “others” out of people who are really very much easier to understand.⁴

Serpent handlers are actually just like their neighbors: semi-rural, often poor, and victims of an economy that has bled their region of capital and concentrated it in outsiders’ hands. They drive pickup trucks, listen to country music, eat Southern foods, travel, and talk just like their neighbors. Yes, they take up serpents and drink poison in church, but most do so quite infrequently. In fact, says Birkhead, “remove the serpents, poison, and fire, and serpent handling is indistinguishable from the plethora of small, independent, Pentecostal and charismatic groups throughout the South, other parts of the United States, and around the world.”⁵

My point is simply that sociological ethnography, like good reporting, brings us face to face with other human beings. Cannot ethnography do more than this? Should it not do more than this? What differentiates good ethnography from good reporting, other than speed?

Anthropological ethnography, of course, was born in the Foreign Office and in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, not in the settlement house. Rather than seeking assimilation, it grew out of an interest in imperial control – an interest not always shared by the ethnographers!

British officials hoped to get natives to stop fighting and pay taxes, while American officials hoped to turn tribes into family farmers. French and Russians had similar agendas. Rulers needed data, so they hired ethnographers to record their subjects’ folkways, mores, and customs as well

² Jonathan Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988); Alex Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America* (New York: Double-day, 1991); Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, *Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble and Coming of Age in the Bronx* (New York: Scribner, 2003).

³ Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2003); James A. Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness: Idaho Christian Patriotism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990).

⁴ Jim Birkhead, “Reading “Snake Handling”: Critical Reflections,” in *Anthropology of Religion: A Handbook*, ed. Stephen D. Glazier (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 19-84.

⁵ Birkhead, “Reading,” 32.

as their political structures, material accomplishments, and world views. Rulers hoped – correctly – that such “power/knowledge”⁶ would help Europe dominate the world.

The solution here was not to make foreigners “just like us,” as that would force us to accord them rights. Anthropological ethnography focused on differences, in effect seeing “others” as restless natives or as exotic relics that need preserving. We have the power to poke our noses into their affairs; they do not have such power to investigate us.⁷ As sociology was popularly imagined to ameliorate current social problems, anthropology was imagined as something of a salvage operation: powerful First-World academics defending those on the margins of the world economic system, while recording “native” traditions.

Not only has anthropological ethnography been forced to come to terms with these imperial origins; it has also had to confront the cultural sources of its disciplinary attractiveness. Simply put, a large percentage of young anthropologists enter the field out of a wish to give “natives” space to preserve their ways, just as a large percentage of young sociologists are moved by a wish to help the “less fortunate.” A bit of classroom ethnography – or perhaps just good reportage – makes this plain.

Anthropologists realized the implications of such things much earlier than did sociologists – a factor in generating the reflexive turn that anthropological ethnography has taken over the last two-and-a-half decades. This is one reason that I edited *Personal Knowledge and Beyond*: to let sociologists and other scholars of religion know what they had missed. As anthropologists have explored in some depth, representation and discourse do matter to ethnography, not least because ethnography is as much “writing about” peoples as it is the study of them.

Shawn Landres points out (in our volume) that there are at least eight levels of representation involved in each ethnographic encounter, and he notes that the discourses through which we conceive or fail to conceive of those representations shape both the products of our work and its social impact.⁸ He and the other contributors to that volume show that ethnographers are more than just observed observers. Their (our) task is to bring cultural patterns to the surface – including those patterns that shape our own ethnographic practices.

Jim Birkhead does exactly this with his review of the discourses around snake-handling religions. Among other things, he shows how snake-handling is more significant for mainstream culture than it is for its practitioners. By resonating with our own “dark and abiding cultural obsessions with cults,

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

⁷ See Clifford Geertz, “Deep Hanging Out,” *New York Review of Books*, October 22, 1998, 72.

⁸ J. Shawn Landres, “Being (in) the Field: Defining Ethnography in Southern California and Central Slovakia,” in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, ed. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres and Meredith B. McGuire (New York: NYU Press, 2002), 100-12.

inbred and degenerate hill people, fanaticism, danger, sex, and death,"⁹ accounts that emphasize snake-handling tap into non-Southerners images of Appalachian otherness, in fact becoming an icon of that otherness in outsiders' minds.

Ethnography – but not journalism – calls into question such cultural wishes. Journalism – but not good ethnography – takes its readers' culture for granted.

Let me illustrate this with some of my own recent work, an ongoing ethnography of American religious peace-and-justice activism. It is an odd ethnographic project, not the least because it is not located in any one place. Though most of my informants live on the West Coast, their activist lives take place nationally and even internationally.

My work is thus located in a network, not a site. (Mary Jo Neitz's ethnographic study of Wicca¹⁰ highlights some of the ambiguities surrounding such unbounded religious groups, including the unsuitability of using the word "group" for the object of one's investigations.)

I find myself floating through my informants' networks, studying issues loosely captured by the phrase "culture and identity." First, peace-and-justice activists usually find themselves having to construct their own identities, both religious and activist, often in opposition to the identities pushed on them by their organized churches.¹¹ Second, they do so according to rather unconscious patterns, which are both like and not like the identity-forming patterns followed by others in our late-modern world. Despite cogent critiques of the term,¹² I still think that the word "culture" captures something important about the ways people shape (and are shaped by) the worlds that they imagine they live in.

I have been engaged in this project for some time now, seemingly to little result; if I am "doing journalism," it is thus exceedingly slow. A good deal of the sloth is situational and some is biographical. What it has allowed me to do, however, is to study non-activists' reactions to my project – precisely the culture-of-the-audience that tells us something missed by mere object-centered investigation. What do I find?

Folks who hear about my study, including scholars, most typically give what I have come to call the "such heroes!" response. Many people think of religious social activists as heroes on two counts. First, they are heroes for

⁹ Birkhead, "Reading," 33.

¹⁰ Mary Jo Neitz, "Queering the Dragonfest: Changing Sexualities in a Post-Patriarchal Religion," *Sociology of Religion* 61, no. 4 (2000): 369-91; Mary Jo Neitz, "Walking Between the Worlds: Permeable Boundaries, Ambiguous Identities," in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, ed. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres and Meredith B. McGuire (New York: NYU Press, 2002), 33-46.

¹¹ See Meredith B. McGuire and James V. Spickard, "Narratives of Commitment: Social Activism and Radical Catholic Identity," *Temenos: Studies in Comparative Religion* 37-38 (2003): 131-49.

¹² E.g.: Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

their willingness to “put themselves on the line,” non-violently. Second, they are heroes for their religiosity – especially to certain quasi-secular left-liberals. (I shall say how in a moment.)

Let’s start with “putting themselves on the line.” The activists I interview have made major sacrifices for their activist careers, including, in many instances, jail time. Most people are not willing to go to jail for their beliefs, much less face physical danger. As my own parents told me *ad nauseum*, not only can civil disobedience force one to take an unscheduled sabbatical from one’s life; but the consequences of something as minor as “willfully and maliciously blocking a public street or sidewalk” can be severe – especially if one hopes to work for the government or large corporations, join a profession, or otherwise be part of the established middle class.

It may not be so apparent in Massachusetts or California, but much of our country has grown more repressive, not less, in the last few decades. My own minor record could keep me from public school teaching, for example, or from getting certain government grants – which would not have been the case before right-wing lawmakers bureaucratized their retribution.

Note that those who call social activists “heroes” are generally those who agree with the activists’ stance on a particular issue. Leftists honor anti-war protesters; the right-wing honors Operation Rescue and its kin. Even Cardinal Bernardine’s “consistent life ethic” has not brought these groups together; there is, for example, only one priest in the Los Angeles archdiocese who regularly works against both war and abortion.

Given the wide, but shallow support for leftist causes and the fact that right-wing “activists” can get quite well-paying jobs working for the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute, one encounters more paeans to heroic leftists than to heroic rightists. Yet, those paeans are different, precisely because so much of the Left is secular or quasi-secular – and because its secularity is different from the traditional leftist anti-clericalism to which it is heir.

Clark Roof, among others, has charted a growing religious individualism in America, especially among baby boomers; Tom Beaudoin has tracked this among “Gen Xers.” Robert Bellah and his colleagues have noted the rise of what they call “Sheilaism” – individualized religions made up of personal preferences. Nancy Ammerman has suggested that the effort to craft a spiritually meaningful personal life may be a central aspect of post-modern individualism.¹³

There is an authority gap in American religion, particularly on the left, but these and other scholarly observers note that the declining power of religious

¹³ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 1998); Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Nancy T. Ammerman, “Organized Religion in a Voluntaristic Society,” *Sociology of Religion* 58, no. 3 (1996): 203-15.

authority is not matched in the United States by a declining respect for “spirituality” – whatever that admittedly fuzzy term means. As the title of a recent book phrases it, many Americans consider themselves “spiritual but not religious.”¹⁴ They feel drawn by “something higher,” something that they think used to be found in religions. But they do not themselves possess much religious conviction, nor are they willing to take on faith what religious leaders tell them.

This is an unusual agnosticism, build on several certainties: the certainty that spiritual life matters, the certainty that it has something to do with living an ethical life, the certainty that individuals have to decide truths for themselves, the certainty that the country’s organized religions do not have the answers to life’s persistent questions.

Such people honor religious social activists precisely because they project onto those activists the certainties that they, themselves, lack. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful,” one can almost hear them say, “to be sure enough of one’s rightness to go to jail for it. Wouldn’t it be good to stand up for things about which one is certain. Maybe if I read about these heroes, I will become more like them.” So, they buy biographies and books of interviews, and read about the lives of these modern “saints.”¹⁵ Many of these works are good journalism, but they are journalism all the same.

What kind of society do we live in, that reads Appalachian snake-handlers as uneducated degenerates and reads religious social activists – particularly peace-and-justice activists – as saints? What does it say about us that we presume that both of these groups are more religiously devoted than we are? What does it mean that we denigrate one and honor the other, but emulate neither?

Though I have not yet fully sorted out this question – otherwise, I would finish my book and make my publisher happy – I know that the “what heroes!” response tells me something important about American religious culture at the beginning of the 21st century.

Interestingly, it does the same in Europe, especially in Scandinavia and Germany, the parts with which I am most familiar. That supposedly secularized region is awash with spirituality, both individualized and group-oriented. Though their “what heroes!” response has different overtones, it rings some of the same bells.

At least the “what heroes!” folks are nice to me. Activists who hear about my study are often not so nice. Sometimes this amounts to competitive status-seeking; I hang out with one group in Los Angeles that introduces visitors by listing their arrest records, and mine is not very impressive. (I also don’t do party lines well, and this particular group has a definite party line.)

¹⁴ Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁵ E.g.: Catherine Ingram, *In the Footsteps of Gandhi: Conversations with Spiritual Social Activists* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990); Pam McAllister, *You Can’t Kill the Spirit* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1988).

Other groups think I am a journalist, and react based on their past bad treatment. I respect this, having had my views distorted by journalists seeking a juicy quote on a deadline. The hostility usually dissipates, however, once my prospective informants learn that I am truly interested in what they have to say.

Note how I phrase that: “interested in what *they* have to say.” The activists that I interview are not always interested in the questions that I ask them, nor are they interested in filling in blanks in my knowledge. The best interviews seem to be those that blow my agenda out of the water, so to speak, substituting theirs. But I don’t mean just substituting their pre-formed agendas, the speeches that come out when one pushes their “on” buttons, which virtually amount to recorded announcements. (Activists, like professors, get good at this; it seems to be a hazard of our respective occupations.)

The conversations I mean are those that put both of our agendas in question, with my informants’ self-questioning taking the leading role and mine following. These conversations break every interviewing rule that I try to teach my students: about staying on topic, about not intervening with one’s own views, about seeking clarity. And they are richer for it.

I am still trying to figure out exactly what makes these encounters work so well; it has something to do with the way in which they force both my activist interlocutors and me beyond our current self-understandings. On their side, such conversations capture the activists in mid-thought, as they try to wrestle with their own deep life-questions. One set of interviews at a Catholic women’s peace-and-justice center, for example, quickly got beyond the women’s anger at the male-dominated institutional church to explore the ritual life that these women had built among themselves.

One Center staffer, who said “it would be easier to change the color of my eyes or to get a new genetic code than it would be to stop being a Roman Catholic,” now found her Catholic tradition only valuable when practiced with her Center sisters – a practice that combined Jewish, Native American, Zen and Tibetan Buddhist, and, yes, Catholic elements, in seemingly equal proportions. Her account of her search for ritual meaning put my own religious life in question; my willingness to question my way of being encouraged her to open hers to further self-examination and development. Both of us left that conversation changed.

The issue here is more than just the fact that survey data, church attendance figures, and the like would not count this woman as institutionally religious, and would thus miss some key features of the contemporary religious scene. (I shall return to this point a bit later.) More important is both her and my thirst for expanding our personal horizons, and the fact that both her activism and my more-than-academic interest in it are tied up in this yearning.

It strikes me that one of the distinguishing marks of these religious social activists is just the opposite of what the “what heroes!” crowd expects: these people *don’t* have answers, they are making up their lives as they go along, and the only constant is that they insist that those lives be meaningful. Their

“religiousness” consists precisely in their taking seriously the idea that God demands something of them, clues to which can be found in their religious traditions. Clues, but not answers.

Most peace-and-justice activists, especially Catholics, are so alienated from their churches that they leave almost nothing unquestioned. Not even God, to put a traditional label on whatever it is that they hear calling them. A constantly evolving mix of alienation, devotion, action, and passion, their inner lives are turbulent but fulfilling.

Perhaps many of them are like the Quaker/Buddhist activist I interviewed, who described her activism as an appendage of her spiritual life: “When some injustice bothers me, I cannot sit in stillness,” she told me. “Sitting meditation is the center of my life. I have to work to overcome that injustice so that I can meditate again.”

What is it about our society that calls forth such yearning, both in religious social activists and in ourselves? What does this say about the shape and direction of contemporary religion? My ethnographic investigations are only beginning to make these questions clear. The answers will, I am afraid, be some time coming.

Here, then, is the first-level answer to my question about the contrast between ethnography and slow journalism in the study of religion. Journalism enters the field with clear concepts and objectives, it examines the people on whom it is reporting, and it reports. Good.

Ethnography enters the field in an attempt not so much to examine these people as to explore what we and they have to tell each other. This is a deeper sort of equality than is usually envisioned.

“The field” does not just consist of “the natives,” but also includes our wish to learn about them, the cultural sources of that wish, and what we learn about both native society and own through our encounters. This requires good reporting, but it also requires reflexive self-consciousness. It requires us to treat ourselves as our objects of study, alongside our informants. Would that all so-called ethnographies of religion were this self-conscious in practice.

II. EPISTEMOLOGICAL MUSINGS

So much for “the deductions from the obvious” that I promised to explore with you. I also promised you some “epistemological musings,” and for these, I want to take things in a different direction.

Though anthropological ethnography’s hard-won reflexivity rescues it from Stark’s epithet on one level, there is another level that remains untouched. Rephrased a bit, the charge of “slow journalism” asks ethnographers to reflect on their particularism. Can the detailed study of a single society, a single village, even a single person produce generalizable knowledge? Or can it, at best, accumulate the facts, which, when added to the facts of thousands of other studies, produce such generalizations?

Think for a moment of how ethnography and other qualitative research methods are often portrayed, particularly in methods textbooks. Compared to quantitative methods, they usually play one of two roles. Either they are seen as preliminary investigations, the first forays into previously uncharted territory to be followed by large-scale mapping expeditions. Or they are case studies, which show how general social laws operate in a specific time and place.

Thus, Lynn Davidman's *Tradition in a Rootless World* tries to figure out why some Jewish women convert to Orthodoxy, breaking ground for quantitatively-oriented sociologists to produce surveys that can tell us how widespread such phenomena really are.¹⁶

Or Shoshanah Feher's *Passing Over Easter* tells us how well-understood social processes operate among Messianic Jews.¹⁷ The latter of these is clearly sociologically informed journalism: it tells a story about a little-understood group, but it does not generate new theoretical knowledge. The former tells us something about religion's shape, forcing us to revise our existing theoretical constructs or create new ones.

My first epistemological point has to do with the relative conceptual naiveté of much sociology of religion, including much that passes for theoretical work. As Peter Beyer points out in a brilliant article in the latest issue of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, "the modern sense of what counts as religion and as a religion is a product of relatively recent, highly selective, and somewhat arbitrary historical (re)construction."¹⁸

Beginning in the European "long reformations," religion became defined as a matter of authorized belief wrapped in a particular organizational structure. Competing churches drew increasingly firm boundaries between "religion" and "superstition." Popular beliefs and practices most often got edited out, producing a split between what Meredith McGuire calls "official" and "unofficial" religion.¹⁹

In part responding to official religion's cultural hegemony, especially in North America,²⁰ sociologists of religion have largely failed to question what amounts to a definition of religion as "belief-cult." (As Beyer points out elsewhere, this is the literal translation for the term that Chinese scholars use for religion, *zongjiao*. Having no indigenous term for religion, they found this the closest match to what they observed of Western religious practices. The occasional efforts to reshape Confucianism on a Western model failed, so the

¹⁶ Lynn Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

¹⁷ Shoshanah Feher, *Passing Over Easter: Constructing the Boundaries of Messianic Judaism* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Peter Beyer, "Constitutional Privilege and Constituting Pluralism: Religious Freedom in National, Global, and Legal Context," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 3 (September 2003): 333-39.

¹⁹ See Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Spirituality and Materiality in Individuals' Religious Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

²⁰ Lori G. Beaman, "The Myth of Pluralism, Diversity, and Vigor: The Constitutional Privilege of Protestantism in the United States and Canada," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 3 (September 2003): 311-25.

oft-repeated claim that the Chinese have no religion is true – but by definition.²¹)

Knowing this, observing the historical construction of “Hinduism” as a “world religion” at the end of the 19th century, and seeing the ambiguous mix of official and unofficial religious elements in religious life as it is lived today, no reflexive ethnographer can accept the blithe assumption that national and trans-national statistics on religious belief and practice have the meanings claimed for them.

“Cross-country data sets,” society-wide promotion of religious “values and behaviors,” and questions about religiosity’s decline arise from such arbitrary definitional acts that accurate generalization is scarcely possible. More precisely: generalizations based on such matters are as relative to their definitional axioms as Riemannian or Lobachevskian geometry are to their axioms about parallel lines.

Before I lower the boom any more on this, let me take an example from my social activist study. As part of that study, I have spent a good deal of time at the Los Angeles Catholic Worker. Not only does this give my students a chance to see the worst poverty in L.A., and on the street level, not in some tour bus; it also gives them a chance to experience an activist community that claims to “live its faith” – following Jesus to live among the poorest of the poor.

The community runs a soup kitchen, a free clinic, and an AIDS hospice, and there are always homeless folk present as long-term house guests. “Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless” is more than a series of honored but otherwise ignored commandments. So, by the way, is “sit-in at the Federal Building, protest at Vandenburg Air Base, picket the Archbishop’s cathedral.” Catholic Workers do not make themselves popular with either worldly or churchly authorities.

Dorothy Day, by the way, was similarly difficult, but she always said that she’d close down her operation the moment the archbishop asked her to. The Los Angeles group says that they’ll be glad to talk with the archbishop about closing, over dinner at their favorite Mexican restaurant – and he should bring his credit card.

How do these people maintain their faith and their community, in the face of overwhelming opposition to their goals and the ongoing repressive direction of American public life? (Saint Dorothy also famously said, “Our chief problem is this stinking, filthy, rotten System,” a sentiment that her present followers affirm.) How do they keep going, when they acknowledge their complete political ineffectiveness, even at protecting the homeless from police sweeps?

²¹ Peter Beyer, “Defining Religion in Cross-National Perspective: Identity and Difference in Official Conceptions,” in *Defining Religion: Investigating the Boundaries Between Sacred and Secular*, ed. Arthur L. Griel (Elsevier, 2003).

Part of the answer is their insight that they must do this work, effective or not, because, to quote one of their leaders, “we will die [spiritually] if we do not practice what we believe.”²² To use an old language, it saves their souls – not in some future world but here, right now. Their social activism is thus profoundly religious, even sacramental.

Another part of the answer, though, comes from their ritual life, specifically their Wednesday evening masses, held at their house in Boyle Heights, East L.A. Together with “family” and friends, often led by whichever priest they sprung from jail after their Wednesday morning protests – and when not, by a member of their own community – these celebrations help renew their sense of the rightness of what they are doing and of the appropriateness of the identity that they have chosen. Specifically, the *experience* of this ritual restores a polythetic sense of “rightness” to their world. By structuring time and attention, the house-mass restores their sense of their mission’s sacred character.

A dozen years ago, I described how Navajo ceremonies structure time and attention to create a restored experience of wholeness to their participants.²³ Catholic Worker masses similarly resemble and alter traditional Catholic ceremonies in such a way as to recreate a sense of experienced community.

I have described this at length elsewhere²⁴; here I have time only to note that the ceremony begins with a depressing litany of the things going wrong with the world, moves to a communal homily, to which the entire group can contribute, halts for a passing-of-the-peace during which every participant hugs every other person in the room (which takes some time), and ends with a self-administered sharing of bread and wine.

Symbolically speaking, the service moves participants from their wounded isolation into community, and then makes that community its own priest. Great buckets of soup are then blessed and served to those present. Eight to ten workers load the remaining soup and bread into a van, which they take to L.A.’s Skid Row and distribute to the homeless. Having made themselves priests in their own house, they serve as priests to the poorest of the poor, distributing the soup, bread, and water that are the ritual staff of life.

Like Navajo ceremonies, this ritual operates on at least three levels. The first level is thought, as the words of song, homily, and greeting reinforce worker theology. The second level is symbol, as I have just described: the transubstantiation not just of bread and wine and soup but of individuals into a priestly community.

²² *Catholic Agitator*, December 2001.

²³ James V. Spickard, “Experiencing Religious Rituals: A Schutzian Analysis of Navajo Ceremonies,” *Sociological Analysis* 52, no. 2 (1991): 191-204.

²⁴ James V. Spickard, “Ritual, Symbol and Experience: Understanding Catholic Worker House Masses,” paper presented at the Society for the Anthropology of Religion, April Cleveland, 2002b. A more detailed analysis will appear in James V. Spickard, *After Colonialism: Towards a World-Conscious Sociology of Religion* (forthcoming).

The third level is experience, for this transformation does not just occur in head-space, to use a contemporary idiom. It also occurs through the structuring of time and attention, through the sequence of events that guide participants' senses. Catholic doctrine claims that transubstantiation is more than symbolic, and Catholic Worker ritual practices the experiential transubstantiation of the community into the Body of Christ. (For the theorists among you, I use both Schutzian phenomenology and Navajo theology to trace such details in my full treatments.)

I previously suggested that the "what heroes!" response to my project comes from a contrast between liberal/leftists' spiritual uncertainty and their projection of certainty onto the religious social activists whom I am studying. Let me now amend that suggestion – without any demonstration – by noting the cultural importance of the "quest for community" to precisely those social strata.²⁵

Are Catholic Workers seeking community as much as they are seeking peace and justice, given that all three of these are counter-cultural in today's America? What is the interaction between community and mission in the self-proclaimed peace-and-justice activist community? Is part of the "what heroes!" response a response to an imagined community, paralleling the imagined certainty I previously mentioned? Again, I cannot answer these questions, but they must be posed.

Back to my epistemological point. I have claimed that theoretical generalizations are accurate only relative to their definitional axioms: define religion as church plus belief and one can make one set of generalizations, define it differently and different generalizations present themselves. My reliance on Schutz and the Navajo grounds religion in experience rather than in discursive thought. Each set of theories generates a different religious object to investigate.²⁶ Epistemologically, these seem all on a level; you pay your money and you take your choice.

This is where ethnography becomes important in the study of religion. As a reflexive practice, ethnographic investigation involves the constant questioning of one's own conceptual apparatus. Like journalists, pew counters, and survey researchers, ethnographers inevitably bring unexamined concepts into the field, through which they view their research site and subjects.

Unlike journalists, however, reflexive ethnographers are professionally committed to examining these concepts, to making them problematic. More, their conclusions (always tentative) arise from the spaces between concepts: from the interplay between the natives' visions, the visions that they brought with them to the field, and their ever-transforming understanding of the multitudinous factors that shape such encounters.

²⁵ See Robert A. Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953); Joseph Berman and Arthur J. Vidich, *The New American Society: The Revolution of the Middle Class* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), among others.

²⁶ See my essay on competing narratives in the sociology of religion, found in the opening pages of Chapter 10, Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002).

Question everything! (Especially oneself). Ethnography is the only research tradition I know that has institutionalized this attitude – and thus the only one capable of weighing the relative merit of the concepts that typify various theoretical approaches.

I hate to have to say it, but the current mania for rational-choice market models of religion is misplaced. Such models – with their economic measures of religious competition, their organization-centered definitions of religious vitality, and their reliance on membership figures and survey data – don't have much connection with religion-as-lived-by-ordinary-people.

I demonstrated some years ago the empirical inaccuracy of rational-choice theory as a description of people's actual motives.²⁷ If the definitions of religion that support this and other macro-level approaches bear little resemblance to people's actual religious lives, then their conclusions are not valid.

Is it any surprise that post-reformations religions, especially evangelical ones, are declared the "winners" in the religious marketplace, and that other trends supposedly don't matter? The answer is pre-defined! Such definitions distort the sociology of religion down particular channels – and not the most fruitful ones, in my view.

Epistemologically, reflexive ethnography is the *only* technique capable of weighing the relative merits of different definitions of religion, and thus of the theories that sociologists have erected upon them. "Cross-country data sets," society-wide promotion of religious "values and behaviors," and macro-based predictions of religiosity's decline, rise, or survival are useless if built on sand. There has not been enough good reflexive ethnography in the sociology of religion even to begin to determine where firm ground lies. But it does not lie with the simplistic views on which such approaches depend.

The textbook presentation of the relationship between qualitative and quantitative research methods thus needs emendation. While it is true that qualitative research either breaks paths or fills in details, it is *not* true that quantitative research can generalize unproblematically. Generalizations must be tied closely to their base. Too much quantitative sociology of religion neglects to question its core concepts; its conclusions are thus falsely concrete.

This is not the right note on which to end my talk, so it is fortunate that I have one more epistemological point to make. This has to do with the place of "truth" in ethnographic inquiry – and by extension in other forms of inquiry as well.

I have already made reference to the fact that theories of religion are built on definitional constructs, and that different constructs will thus produce different theories. I have claimed that only reflexive ethnography can adjudicate between such constructs, both because it stays close to its data and

²⁷ James V. Spickard, "Rethinking Religious Social Action: What is 'Rational' About Rational-Choice Theory?" *Sociology of Religion* 59, no. 2 (1998): 99-115.

because it has institutionalized conceptual self-doubt – and thus self-examination.

This claim seems problematic, however, given an increasing willingness on the part of anthropological ethnographers to question whether “truth” can be part of their intellectual project. Is truth an outmoded framework for post-positivist ethnography? Too many bright people have voiced such concerns for them to be dismissed out of hand.

Let us first dispose of the notion that any science gives us “true” knowledge of its subject matter. Since C.S. Peirce, most philosophers have been clear that truth is available only eschatologically.²⁸ That is, truth is unobtainable by mere mortals, who can at best work towards it.

A scientific community accumulates wisdom by collecting the experiences of its members, then using these experiences to revise their theories. Though no straight-line matter, this continual course-correction should – in the end – move the community toward a “true” account of the-way-things-are. But it can never claim to have arrived at a “final truth,” for such a claim would require omniscience – precisely what we, as humans, lack. Unlike communities that anchor truth in the past or in some *a priori* revelation, the scientific community corrects its mistakes by systematically revising its beliefs in the light of experience – a process that, in the mortal world, never ends.

Yet, just as the calculus can speak of a curve approaching a limit, so in science one can speak of the limit of a line of inquiry. For Peirce, “Truth is that concordance of abstract statement with the ideal limit towards which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific belief.”²⁹ We can never reach that limit – at least we can never know that we have done so – but its existence as a goal guides our efforts to achieve it. The very act of trying to do so, of directing our work as if truth were within reach, moves the scientific community forward.

“Truth” stands here as a regulative ideal, a concept that, though itself epistemologically insecure, makes science possible. Kant argued that the idea of “God” so regulates morality: one cannot demonstrate God’s existence, but some faith in a supreme power is needed to have a moral life.

In Kant’s vision, all practical thought requires regulation, much as a motor needs a governor to do useful work. Though one cannot deduce the aptness of such a regulator *a priori*, one can judge that aptness by the results obtained. When scientists speak of “truth,” they state their faith that – given limitless time, through rigorous analysis, doubt, intelligence, and careful listening to experience – humans will be able to understand the world.

Without some such belief, inquiry would proceed aimlessly and without rudder. With it, the scientific community has steerage. Not that it can ever prove its theories right – Peirce and Popper agree on the epistemological

²⁸ Charles Sanders Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (Nov 1877): 1-15.

²⁹ Quoted in James K. Feibelman, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Charles S. Peirce* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), 212.

impossibility of that! – but it can at least prove some theories wrong.³⁰ That itself constitutes scientific progress, and “truth” is the mental ideal that makes such progress possible.

Despite their relentless self-questioning, reflexive ethnographers do not really think that “anything goes” in ethnography. Among other things, they stand opposed to non-reflexive ethnography – both to slow journalism and to old-style colonial ethnography, which viewed its subjects through an imperial lens. That is (and I am generalizing here), they think that this style of ethnography is *wrong*, because it fails to locate its own project culturally. The imperial gaze imagines that it is not part of its subject matter, when it really constructs that subject matter – specifically by constructing “natives” who need white (or other imperial) rulers.

To mention a few theoretical specifics that have bedeviled anthropologists through the years: we know that societies are not timeless, so ignoring their history – as ethnographers used to do – distorts them fundamentally.³¹ We no longer think of culture as a set of impersonal rules directing human action; instead it consists of resources for action, subject to human choice and will.³² We no longer think that colonial power relations are not external to so-called primitive societies; they construct those societies and so must be central to ethnography rather than peripheral to it.³³

These and other issues separate reflexive ethnographers from their predecessors, and justify their claim to portray more truly the people about whom they write. “Truth” here continues to regulate inquiry.

Were it to cease doing so – were “beauty,” “the market,” or “careerism” (to mention just three other options) to replace “truth” as the ideal guiding the ethnographic community – then ethnography would cease being a science. Ethnographers would choose gorgeous over accurate prose, salable over uncomfortable insights, or the professionally useful book over the scholarly one. Though individual ethnographers may have chosen such ideals, the community of ethnographers has not done so. Ethnography remains scientific to the degree that it still tries accurately to understand – and portray – the people it investigates.

As I note in my contribution to *Personal Knowledge and Beyond*,³⁴ reflexive ethnography is also regulated by a second ideal – the ideal of “equality.” This is the notion that ethnographer and ethnographic informant are both metaphysically and epistemological equal, as are their respective societies.

³⁰ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, edited by Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955); Karl Raimund Popper, Sir, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Basic Books 1959).

³¹ Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*.

³² Mary Douglas, “Passive Voice Theories in Religious Sociology,” *Review of Religious Research* 21, no. 1 (1979): 51-61.

³³ Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

³⁴ James V. Spickard, “On the Epistemology of Post-Colonial Ethnography,” in *Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion: Knowledge, Power, and the Interpreter's Position*, ed. James V. Spickard, Shawn Landres and Meredith B. McGuire (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 237-52.

Neither has a monopoly on truth, neither understands things perfectly, neither's views can remain unquestioned in the ethnographic encounter. Like "truth," "equality" is not provable.

It is, however, necessary for the accomplishment of the ethnographic task. In *Personal Knowledge*, I focused largely on the rejection of political and conceptual imperialism, overturning the "You think you are testing your faith with snakes, but actually you are displaying your manhood" approach that typified so much old-style work.³⁵

Here, I would rather emphasize the fact that ethnographers do not just have to represent the "natives" in their ethnographies, though they do. They also have to represent themselves representing the natives – i.e., they have to place themselves in the picture. Otherwise, they fail to question their own concepts and don't get any of their representations right.

Further, by including in their data their own culture's reasons for finding these particular "natives" meaningful, they ask their readers to include themselves as well. All are part of the pie: native, ethnographer, and reader; occasionally native-reader, native-ethnographer and ethnographic native. The whole operation is made possible by assuming the metaphysical and epistemological equality of all three.

"Equality" is a regulative ideal here rather than a sign of political allegiance. Without it, one is trapped in an imperial gaze, reading one's informants without reference to our relationship to them. To avoid this trap, we must presume that our own concepts are as tenuous as those of the groups we are examining. This is deep equality indeed.

Critics will answer that this is a very Western value, and it is. The West, for good or ill, has sought to understand the rest of the world – an activity that reflexive ethnographers hope to salvage from its longtime intellectual companion: the wish to dominate it. As Mary Douglas put it somewhat provocatively nearly thirty years ago,

It is part of our culture to recognize at last our cognitive precariousness. It is part of our culture to be sophisticated about fundamentalist claims to secure knowledge. It is part of our culture to be forced to take aboard the idea that other cultures are rational in the same way as ours.³⁶

This is more than just cultural, however; it is also the consequence of ethnography's search for truth. Reflexive ethnographers realize that understanding others not only requires understanding them from the inside; it also requires questioning our own ways of seeing. The first treats informants as our equals in order to get them to be honest with us; the second

³⁵ E.g.: Weston La Barre, *"They Shall Take Up Serpents" – Psychology of the Southern Snake-Handling Cult* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962); Stewart Elliott Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

³⁶ Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975: xvii-xviii).

treats us as their equals by throwing doubt on our own accustomed views in the same way that we throw doubt on theirs.

This is a rather specific human interest, in Habermas's sense of that term.³⁷ It comes from a value-stance, for its faith is a radical faith in Western universalism: not the belief that the West *is* universal, but the faith that humans can approach the universal by transcending their limited visions through dialogue with everyone. But it is not limited *to* that value-stance, for its goal is the accurate representation of other's lives. Reflexive ethnography claims that its predecessors' unwillingness to embrace equality blinded them to their own values and closed them to real dialogue; thus, they missed much of what they could have learned.

Like "truth," "equality" is a special kind of ideal: one that pushes its holders out of their complacency. Commitment to neither value adds to people's biases; quite the contrary, such commitments demand that they give them up. In fact, that is the beauty of regulative ideals. Though apparently limiting scientific inquiry, they actually deepen it. A commitment to "truth" enables science to understand the world more completely; a commitment to "equality" empowers ethnographers to take their subjects more seriously – and to question their own blindnesses.

Just as Kant's ideal of "God" steered him toward a universal, not a limited morality, so these ideals steer us toward a broader, not a limited science. It seeks truth through a close examination of particular human lives and it presumes human equality as the way to do so. Value-laden it is, but science precisely because of it.

³⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).