Ecclesiology and Ethnography: one world
revisited

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Abstract
It is essential for theology to attempt to bring the two disciplines of ecclesiology and ethnography together. There are not just practical but distinctively theological reasons for this claim. In the end everything depends on the view one holds of the relation between God and the world.

Keywords: ecclesiology, ethnography, God, world

Two movements of thought
I must confess that the title of this conference owes something to a piece I published called ‘Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Worlds or One?’ in a book which was intended to be a kind of manifesto for the
Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network.\textsuperscript{1} So the time has come, three years later, to \textit{re-visit} the one world for which I argued earlier.

I offered in that earlier article a picture of the one world I hope we inhabit, and I re-produce it here. A kind of cosmic egg in shape, it is actually about a way of working, a way of approaching the world. It also remains an experimental diagram for others to adapt. This is a map of a process which makes room both for an ecclesiology based in God, and for empirical methods shared

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{beliefs} \\
\item concepts promises
\item models \\
\item analogies imagination
\item engagement \\
\item religious experience stories & practices "acts of God"
\item community \\
\item story of faith doctrines rituals
\item test \\
\item form
\item self-revealing triune God
\item opening horizons
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{1} Paul S. Fiddes, ‘Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Worlds or One?’, in Pete Ward (ed.), \textit{Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 13-35.
with the social sciences. So, getting familiar with this world, we notice first that it has a shape which is both deductive and inductive. The downward arrows are what might be called a deductive movement, and the upward arrows are inductive.

One reason why the two disciplines of ecclesiology and ethnography may seem worlds apart is that the first is quite deductive in method, and the second fundamentally inductive. Ecclesiology, as employed by theologians, is deeply rooted in a doctrine of the triune God, and so seems to take its sources ‘deductively’ from the Holy Scriptures, the tradition of the church, its liturgy and its established practices. *This can be seen happening on the right hand side of the map.* This – it seems – is usually how a doctrine of the church is made. I say ‘seems’, because I am going to challenge these assumptions. Ethnography, as employed by social scientists, is rooted in observing the life and practices of a specified group of human people and drawing conclusions ‘inductively’ from them. In the deductive method of inference, conclusions are drawn quite tightly from accepted premises, in this case the beliefs already held through the years by the Christian community. In the inductive method of inference we move from particular situations and experiences to more general conclusions. *This is what is happening on the left hand side of the map,* though we shall see that the story is a bit more complicated.
In short, my argument is that it is essential for theology to attempt to bring the two disciplines together. There are not just practical but distinctively theological reasons for this claim. In the end everything depends on the view one holds of the relation between God and the world.

After all, the church is not merely a social grouping but a community which is engaged in the communion of the triune God. Recent ‘koinonia ecclesiology’, to be found in all Christian churches,\(^2\) emphasises that the koinonia or ‘fellowship’ of the church reflects – and indeed participates – in the koinonia of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in God.\(^3\) If we think of the relational movement in God which is like a Father sending out a Son, expressed from without beginning in an ‘eternal generation’, and subsequently sent on mission into the created world, then this shapes all the movements of mission in the church as it gives itself generously for the life of society around; the key thought will be ‘as the Fa-


ther has sent me, so I send you’ (John 20: 21). If we think of the relational movement in God which is like a Son responding to a Father and glorifying him through his obedient acceptance of the task laid upon him, then this shapes all movements of discipleship and worship in the church. If we think of the relational movement in God which is like a Spirit of love and hope, opening up the divine relations to new depths in themselves and to a real future, then this shapes all movements of openness in the church, to others and to a future unconstrained by the conditions of the present. Since these movements in God are self-giving and suffering love, then we can also think of them with different genders in appropriate circumstances, so that we can imagine relations which are like those between a mother and a daughter (or a mother and a son, or a father and a daughter) and which similarly impress themselves on the life of the church.

Later I shall return to the idea of ‘relational movements’ in God, but for the moment I want to affirm that ecclesiology is grounded in God, and its story is nothing less than an engagement in the metanarrative of the Trinity. This is a narrative given through the self-disclosure of God at key moments in human history, and through human reflection on this encounter, prompted by its impact on the human mind. It is this all-embracing environment of the triune God that I try to show by the all-surrounding circle in the map.
No mere deduction

What happens if we fail to take induction from empirical investigation seriously? Then we simply apply a pre-existing doctrine of ecclesiology to a particular situation. The presupposition here would be that Christian theology is a set of unchanging truths which only need to be translated into different cultural contexts, like translating a text from ancient Hebrew into modern English. We might then take the New Testament concept of the church as the Body of Christ, elaborated in the church fathers as the theology of a eucharistic community, and then ask how any local church matches up to this vision. Or we might begin with a theory of God as ‘communion’, and then examine the way that a church reflects or fails to reflect such a model. This is often called the ‘deductive’ method, working from large principles to application in particular situations.

I do want to affirm that the deductive movement of thought, working from established principles or from canonical texts to particular situations, certainly has a place in the project of ecclesiology. But there are problems if this becomes the predominant approach. There are many
reasons why we must take the contextualization of theology more seriously than this.\(^4\)

We need to listen carefully to the stories that people tell about themselves in a particular historical and geographical situation. The reason for this is not just being kind and generous. There are reasons \textit{internal} to Christian theology, which are part of its own momentum. There are the central linked ideas of incarnation, sacrament and revelation. In the first place, there is incarnation. Christian faith affirms that God has become flesh not in a general, universal way but particularly as a Jewish male in first century Palestine. This leads to a kind of ‘sacramental’ understanding of reality in which God is encountered in an embodied way, through concrete realities, and not merely through ideas. The ordinary things of life can become transparent to God’s presence. \textit{Sacrament} means taking bodies seriously.\(^5\) This then further involves a view of \textit{revelation} as the self-unveiling or the self-offer of God rather than a direct communication of propositional truths.\(^6\) God communicates God’s own


self through actions, relationships and symbols in daily life, though this self-offering is fully expressed only in the person of Jesus. So we cannot simply impose a set of revealed truths on a situation.

In other words, for theological reasons an element of induction is necessary, working from the details of the actual situation to theological principles. A purely inductive approach has, however, the dangers of relativism and a floating free from the Christian tradition.

Now, since revelation is embodied in worldly and secular forms, it is appropriate that ecclesiology should use some secular tools for the analysis of these forms. In our age these are predominantly the tools of the human sciences, but since this is theology these are not to be used as if they are autonomous disciplines; they are to be used in finding the theological dimension in worldly forms of life.

Thus my picture of one world, my flow-chart of deduction and induction, bears remarkable similarities to method in the hard sciences and the human sciences. In both these disciplines there is an observation and collection of data, either from the physical world around or from human life. Usually it is well recognized that this data, and its observation by researchers is influenced by existing traditions in the community. There is a deductive movement going on. Then by induction from the data, a theory is reached which is a prediction about future behaviour, either
of entities in the natural world or by human persons, and this prediction can be tested by experiment. Experiment is, of course, more morally problematic in the human sciences, although it might be practised through a changing of one variable in the situation to see what effect this has.

But in order to get to prediction in either case, we have to pass through a stage of making models about reality. To take an example from the physical sciences, scientists do not move directly from observation of data to the theory stage by inference or induction alone; they have to make acts of creative imagination, which involve the use of analogies and models (see the left-hand side of the map above). For instance, gas particles might be pictured as billiard balls colliding and bouncing off each other, and from this model a kinetic theory of gases can be developed – a theory of the way gases move. In a moment I intend to mention an example of model-making from the human sciences.

**Method in practical theology: the big difference**

It should now be clear how scientific and social-scientific kinds of enquiry might occupy the universe of practical theology. It is not a mere matter of correlation, but integration. At the point of the ‘engagement’ of the researcher in ecclesiology, ‘data’ will include people’s religious expe-
riences, the stories people tell about themselves as Christian disciples, and their practices such as prayer and other rituals. The researcher will also want to listen carefully for what has might be called ‘everyday theology’ or ‘ordinary theology’ – the way that believers reflect on their faith and talk about God, without any benefit from the kind of academic or formal theology that is done in universities and seminaries. This is usually talk about what God is doing in people’s lives, or disappointment about what seems a failure of God to act. That is why I have put the label ‘acts of God’.

The kind of experiences that a researcher might come across here are: wonder (or a sense of the holy); a sense of being at one with the wholeness of things (or mysticism); a reorientation of life (or conversion); courage (in the face of suffering and death); and a feeling of obligation (a sense of moral demands). Data can be collected through a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods – surveys, participant observation, interviews, analysis of speech patterns appearing in the discourse of the group, and study of journals kept by members of the group.

There must be then an inductive movement from collecting data to making theory, which in the case of theology will be beliefs or concepts. Just like the hard and the social sciences, to arrive at this kind of meaning theology too uses ‘models’ – an example might be a certain image of God – and I want to return to this model-making in a moment.
Like the other two disciplines, the ‘data’ is being produced by a community in which there is a whole network of belief, practice and understanding built up over the years (see the right-hand side of the map above). In fact, in ecclesiology this is more pronounced than in either of the other two disciplines. The data is already being interpreted by members of the community who are being engaged with, as well as by the researcher herself or himself. There is then a strong element of deduction from received ‘doctrine’, practised in rituals.

There are, then, certainly similarities between method in the physical and human sciences on the one hand, and in practical theology on the other, but there is also one profound difference. My picture of the one world tries to represent this.

The huge difference is a belief in revelation, which is represented in the diagram by the all-embracing sphere. God is not an object like other objects in the world and so cannot be observed, but this does not mean that all we have to go on is the data of human religious experience. Theology, I suggest, presumes that we live in the presence of a self-revealing God. Indeed, we live in the environment of the triune God, who is always opening and manifesting God’s self to us. What are traditionally called ‘persons’ in God are nothing more or less than movements of relationship in which we are participating. The triune God cannot be conceptualized as either subject or object, and so cannot be known by
observation but only by participation.\textsuperscript{7} We ‘know’ God when we engage in relations of love, compassion and justice which rely on relations which are deeper, richer and more life-enhancing than our own, and by which we can think of God. The language of relations must remain analogical, since literal talk about God is impossible. Talk about God is thus apophatic and kataphatic at the same time, eluding all human conception and yet open to analogies which are given by revelation, creation and incarnation.

This is why I have put the word ‘engagement’ in the flow-chart where ‘observation’ might be expected in other disciplines. While of course we observe objects in the world, ‘engagement’ is common ground between the data of general human experience and religious talk about ‘acts of God’. We cannot observe God, but we can engage in the life of God, participating in the relationships we may call Father, Son and Spirit. This is the greatest challenge to the assumption of the Enlightenment that human beings are the great subjects in the world, and that the remainder of nature is an object to be mastered and controlled. We need to get beyond subject-object thinking to a kind of thinking characterized by engagement and participation. Such participation applies to all created

\textsuperscript{7} I have worked this out in detail in my \textit{Participating in God. A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity} (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 34-50, 81-6.
reality, since everything created participates in the relations of the triune God, or exists in the space opened up by the interweaving relations of God. God makes room in God’s self for us to dwell. Relations do not exist in space, as in Isaac Newton’s receptacle of space-time, but space exists in relations.\(^8\)

This huge difference from the method used by the hard and the social sciences, this context of participation in God has an effect on every part of the picture. For instance, it impacts on the collection of data. The story of Jesus will be brought into interaction with the story of contemporary life. There will be a hermeneutics of an ‘opening of horizons’ between the past story and the present, a dialogical approach in which contemporary culture is both allowed to shape our understanding of the past story and to be challenged by it. This is represented on the flow chart by a two-way arrow on the right hand side. There is inevitably an element of deduction in this process; we are bound, for instance, to ask how the Gospel story of a Jesus who invited the outcasts, the marginal and oppressed of society to sit at his table illuminates the situations in which we find ourselves today. However, there is also induction since we are actually sharing now in the life of God where this story is being played out. So there can be no mechanical extraction and application of a message

from the stories and witnesses of the past. They will be shaped by our present experience, and we must be open to imagination at this stage. There is creative interplay between the past story and the present one, room for the making of lateral leaps and imaginative jumps, as they are placed alongside each other.

Revelation and participation similarly makes a difference to the making of models, compared with other disciplines, while it also encourages a sharing of models. Let me explain this. On the way to theological concepts (see the flow on the left hand side of the map above), we create models to talk about God and God’s action in the world. Such models or metaphors cannot exactly describe God, who cannot be objectified. Yet metaphors can indicate a reality without exactly describing it. ⁹ So these models we create will not only arise out of contemporary experience and action, as is the case with the natural and human sciences. Decisive images for God and God’s action have emerged from events in the past, which belong to the identity of the Christian community, and which cannot be discarded in paradigm shifts that happen in intellectual history.

The image of the Trinity, for instance, as a model for community emerged from the first disciples’ experience of the life of Jesus, his obedi-

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ent sonship and his empowering by the Spirit; it was shaped in the life of the early church by their experience of worship in a particular cultural context. The resurrection is also an indispensable sign of hope for the Christian community, by which cruciform experiences of desolation and despair are to be interpreted. Another persistent metaphor is that of the church as the Body of Christ, though I want now to say that this gives us a significant example of interplay of models between disciplines.

The theologian should attempt to develop a sharing of models by means of which the community and events within it are interpreted. If we have a vision of the whole created world as participating in God, if we believe in incarnation, a sacramental world and a God who reveals God’s self in creation, then we must take seriously the making of all models that interpret reality in all areas of human knowledge. The kind of model-making done by the psychological social sciences has to be taken into account. So must models for the nature of the physical world that have emerged from the modern scientific culture. But these must also interact with the models held in Christian story and belief. The context of revelation is the reason why the methods in various disciplines share one world. Out of a genuine dialogue and not a simple synthesis, both prediction and theory can emerge.

There is a huge amount left to do by ecclesiology in this attempt to share models, and as just one example I want to mention the key im-
age of the ‘body of Christ’. If God makes room in the divine life for all created things, then ecclesiology will need to reflect on living in the tension between several expressions of the body of Christ.\(^{10}\) In the New Testament the phrase, “body of Christ” has a threefold reference— to the glorious resurrection-body of Christ (who is to be identified with the earthly Jesus of Nazareth), to the church, and to the eucharistic bread in which the community shares.\(^{11}\) But developing the witness of scripture, in line with our trinitarian vision, we will want to speak of the embodiment of Christ in the world beyond the walls of the church. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christ “takes form” in the world;\(^{12}\) we may discern the form and presence of Christ, for example, in a group which is working for racial equality, or providing refuge for women who have suffered violence from their husbands, or offering medical care in refugee camps. Different spatial dimensions of the body of Christ – incarnate, eucharistic, ecclesial, and secular – are thus related but not simply identical.

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11. E.g. (i) Rom. 7:4; Phil. 3:21; Jn. 2:21; (ii) 1 Cor. 6:15; 12: 4–31; Rom. 12:3–8; Eph. 4:1–16; Col. 1:18; (iii) 1 Cor. 10:17, 24, 27, 29.

Different bodies in the world—the individual bodily form of Jesus Christ; the sacraments of bread, wine, and water; the eucharistic community; groups in society; and all the variety of matter in nature—are then all related to a common space. The space they occupy in God is not a kind of container, but a reality characterized by relationships, and in this way Christ can be embodied in all of them; his form can be recognized in them, and in all of them he can take flesh.

This understanding of the different forms of the body of Christ means that there is scope for interaction between the ecclesial model of the body of Christ and models of body developed in the social sciences, which are likely to be drawn on in empirical studies. For instance, there is the model of body as habitus, as in the social philosophy of Pierre Bourdieu. The self is understood as an ‘embodied history’ where the body is a site in which social structures are internalized over a length of time. Social customs and conventions are ‘written’ on the body, and this habitus determines our response to the situation in which we are placed. What is learned by the body, Bourdieu comments, is not something that one has but something that one is.13 14 Bourdieu aims to overcome the


dualism between subject and object, and there is obvious overlap here with the Christian model of the body of Christ which is – as we have seen – a highly participative idea.

My argument has been that, through collecting empirical data and sharing models, the doctrine of ecclesiology is actually being made in new ways, while this is always in response to revelation. Thus far I have been basically following the lines of the article I wrote three years ago. But there are a couple of features on my picture, or flow-chart, that I have not yet commented on, and I want to get to them through what I have called ‘re-visiting’ the one world I have been sketching. I have not fundamentally changed my mind, but there are some aspects which I would like to explore a more, perhaps tweaking the ‘map’ in the process. My decision to re-visit has been prompted by a study I have recently done, to consider the criticisms of the ecclesiology of Stanley Hauerwas, recently made by Nicholas Healy in his book, *Hauerwas. A (Very) Critical Introduction*, to which Hauerwas has responded in turn.16

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15. Indeed, readers of this article and the previous one will notice some re-using of material from one to the other.

This contrast between Hauerwas and Healy, two heavy-weight ecclesiologists, has highlighted some important points about ecclesiology and ethnography. In particular, I want to comment on a case-study cited by Hauerwas, on which Healy comments with some acerbity.

**The witness of a local church**

In his writings about the church, Hauerwas is aware of a criticism often levelled against him – that he does not provide any ethnographic studies of actual congregations, but remains in the realms of abstract theory. Perhaps in an attempt to counter this accusation, he offers several times a kind of empirical study – the story of Broadway United Methodist Church of South Bend, Indiana, where he was a member for a number of years. Hauerwas supplies an account of an event in this small church’s life, which had been suffering from declining membership when Hauerwas joined it.

The story goes that at a church board meeting they were discussing whether they should celebrate the eucharist every Sunday rather than occasionally as they did, when the newly-arrived pastor intervened, insisting that it was simply the proper thing to have the eucharist every Sunday. Since they had not been in conformity with that practice, they had no right to vote on it, but should simply go ahead and institute it.
They did, and in the wake of this action they also went on to establish a successful Sunday meal programme for those in need in their area. Hauerwas’ comment is that Broadway Church became a place where he ‘saw a congregation formed and disciplined by the liturgy that made possible an extraordinary social witness.’

Healy confesses he is ‘brought up short’ by this conclusion. In the first place, it seems to him that this was not actually the shaping of the congregation by a practice (the eucharist) but rather by firm leadership. Second, Healy notes that the ‘extraordinary witness’ to the world that resulted from the event was the social provision of a meal, and this is a practice shared with many non-religious organizations. Hauerwas, he complains, is not in fact offering an empirical study, which would have disclosed all the motivations and interpretations involved in these activities. Further, as an observer who is a participant in the object of the study, he should have reported the way that other participants told the story and the way that they conceived the church. This is a story


18. Healy, Hauerwas, 84.

19. Healy is offering a highly edited version of Hauerwas’ account. Hauerwas does give other examples of the witness of the church to the wider community in addition to the meal, and he does include as an appendix a letter sent by a church member giving his reaction to Hauerwas’ telling of
shaped by his own embedded and unacknowledged motivations, such as his theory of formation by liturgical practice, and his desire to offer an example of a community that displays a witness which makes a prophetic response to society. The account, Healy accuses, is just an illustration of what Hauerwas would already have said in theory. Anyway it is by no means evident that this is the kind of exceptional congregation that is needed to support Hauerwas’ theory of ecclesiology.  

Hauerwas’ ecclesiological theory is that the church is a ‘contrasting-community’ over against society, constituting an alternative politics. Following the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, he asserts that all communities are formed by distinctive practices that foster a certain kind of character. Members of the Christian community are formed into the way of life which is a disciple of Christ. Healy points out that for Hauerwas’ social theory of the church to work a critical mass of its members must have contrast-identities, but in reality few in any congregation are

the story and his own view of the event: see Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, 122, 125-7.


able to present to those outside the kind of sharp alternative identity and way of life that Hauerwas demands. Where is Hauerwas’ empirical evidence that the membership of this Methodist Texan congregation was any different?

Healy remarks that empirical observation of congregations shows that a members bring diverse kinds of non-Christian influences from society around into their own identity-construction. There are blurred edges between church and world; the church is within other groups and they are in it, difficult to separate out. This means that character-formation cannot happen exclusively through enacting of practices that create virtues, as Hauerwas’ theory proposes. The church is in fact largely made up of those who are not the committed disciples, faithfully following the church’s practices, as Hauerwas envisages. Healy judges that Hauerwas would regard them as ‘unsatisfactory Christians’, yet they are there in the church, perhaps simply because of their baptism, and ecclesiology must account for them. Moreover, the practices of the community itself share many characteristics with practices outside the church. For instance, the meal of hospitality offered by this congrega-

23. Ibid., 95-6.
24. Ibid., 86-7, 90.
tion, an extension of the eucharist, has resonance with practices outside the church where the homeless or poor are fed.

We should not be surprised about this situation, since I have been proposing that it is not just the church but the whole world that participates in the triune relations of God. This is the world-view that lies behind a sharing of method between theology, social science and hard science. This does not mean that all created things participate in God in the same way, or that there is no difference between the koinonia of church and world. Here the theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar offers a crucial insight: since ‘there is nothing outside God’, there is only one place where even the human ‘no’ of rejection of God can be spoken, and that is – ironically – within the glad response of the Son to the Father. Just as our ‘yes’ to God leans upon the movement of thanksgiving and obedience that is already there in God, like the relation of a Son to a Father, so we speak our pain-giving ‘no’ in the same space. Our ‘no’ is a kind of ‘twisted knot’ within the current of love of the Son’s response.25 The drama of human life can only take place within the greater drama of the divine life. Our dance of relationships can only happen within the patterns

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of the larger Dance. As Balthasar puts it, ‘The creature’s No resounds at the “place” of distinction within the Godhead.’

If all created reality exists in the space made by Uncreated Reality, then it also receives the self-disclosure of God, whatever kind of response it makes, whether ‘yes’, ‘no’ or a blend of the two. This trinitarian account of the relation between God and the world makes empirical investigation essential for ecclesiology. It brings together the theological search for the ‘One’ or the grand meta-narrative (nothing less than the story of the Trinity itself) with a respect for the many details of the world that are held in God.

In my earlier article I had already asserted this, but now in the light of the debate between Healy and Hauerwas I think it is worth tweaking the diagram and explicitly including, in graphic form, the world outside the church which also participates in God. We need to register also the interchange between church and surrounding culture at the key points of the ethnographic method – the shaping of the community, the stories and practices which offer data, and the making of models. This impact is signalled by the arrows on the diagram below (although Peter Berger’s

26. Ibid., 333-34.

perception that the church gives ‘spiritual capital’ to society might lead us to make the arrows two-way in their direction).\(^{28}\)

I have also added an ‘avatar’ to the following diagram, which I will explain in my final section.

Co-workers with God

There are, of course, differences between a world where ‘no’ to God is louder than

‘yes’, and the church where a deliberate ‘yes’ of covenant has been spoken, even where it is mixed with ‘no’. Church practices may not be *totally* different from those in surrounding society, but there is *some* difference in their form when people are expecting to hear the word of God preached, and to share in Christ through bread and wine. However, when Healy wants to say what is distinctive about the church he proposes that it is ‘God’s independent and invisible action’ that turns the empirical church, with all its ‘unsatisfactory’ members, into a Christian community.\(^{29}\)

This is the point at which I suggest Hauerwas’ ecclesiology depicts a more insightful relation between God and church than Healy’s. Healy is surely right about the overlap between practices in church and society, and so offers a picture of the church where more moderate demands are made on church members than in Hauerwas’ concept. Healy has a proper reserve about trying to push ‘ordinary Christians’ towards perfection and heroic witness.\(^{30}\) Not everyone has signed up to be a missionary or a martyr. But Healy then finds the distinctiveness of the church in a *unilateral* activity of God by which the church exists, affirming that the Church is a product of the Holy Spirit who acts freely


\(^{30}\) Ibid., 134.
not only within us but ‘in spite of us and apart from us’.\textsuperscript{31} Here I think that Hauerwas has a better vision of the church, as working together in covenant with God. This is also a better vision of a God who wants created beings to contribute to the divine project in creation. As Hauerwas tells us in his most recent book, ‘I have tried to show that fundamental theological convictions about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are inseparable from the work they do for the formation of people let loose in and for the world’.\textsuperscript{32} In perhaps excusable excess, he even declares that ‘without God’s grace we cannot be saved; but without our (grace-empowered but uncoerced) participation, God’s grace will not save’.\textsuperscript{33}

This cooperation between us and God has an effect on the picture of practical theology. Theology will look for something \textit{unexpected} in the area of ‘theory’ – that is, proposing how and why events happen as they do. It is bound to be alert to the elements of the grace of God and the action of God. This is why I have avoided using the word ‘prediction’ at the point in the map above where concepts or beliefs are made. The natural and social sciences speak of ‘prediction’ emerging from the induc-

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 134.

\textsuperscript{32} Hauerwas, \textit{Work of Theology}, 23.

\textsuperscript{33} Stanley Hauerwas, \textit{Approaching the End. Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics and Life} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 93.
tive method and the making of models. I have used the word ‘promise’ instead. The researcher in ecclesiology is looking for the ways in which God will fulfill the divine promises, and this has room within it for the unexpected, for an openness that mere prediction does not have. The biblical notion of God’s promise is not a tight, enclosed sequence of prediction and outcome. It has scope for divine freedom in bringing about something genuinely new in fulfillment, something surprising. But there is also room for the freedom God gives creation to fulfill the divine aims. It is our working together with God that may result in an open-endedness in theory.

**The researcher**

This brings us to the movement of ‘testing’ the theory that the hard sciences and the social sciences are concerned with. The notion of experimentation in practical theology is problematic to say the least – people are not to be manipulated for the benefit of a researcher. But one of the outcomes of an empirical-ecclesiological study should be transformed practice. This will be a testing in actual community of the belief that has been developed. Insights gained through the use of models and from the making of theory are put back again into action – whether this
is dealing with third world debt or the mission of the local church. Then
the process of reflection begins all over again.

So, in re-visiting the one world, I have been prompted to ask – where is the researcher? Perhaps the picture needs to make this clear, and have put my avatar alongside the line joining belief and engagement. It could be anywhere in the circle of method – where it is not is outside the model as a kind of external observer, and so I have placed a sign barring the researcher there. In the practice of empirical ecclesiology the primary tool is the body and whole being of the researcher. This requires a high degree of self-reflexivity, a consciousness of what’s going on in ourselves as we engage in the community being studied. Classical ethnography stresses the virtues of the detachment and the distancing of the investigator. The method is to live with an ethnic group, living as far as possible as ‘one of them’, thoroughly getting to know their beliefs and practices through careful observation over a long period, and then to writing up an interpretation through employing established categories of social analysis. In on-religious ethnography the ‘outsider’ acts as if he or she is an ‘insider’, and tries to feel the ‘otherness’ or strangeness of the group within his or her own self. But in order to observe and listen care-

fully, the investigator would never actually become one of the group. The interpretation arrived at belongs essentially to the external observer and the academy.

But the ecclesiological researcher may not be an outsider at all but share the same culture and convictions as those studied; since the point of bringing ethnography and ecclesiology together is to study the life of the Christian church, the investigator is likely to be a member of the church although not necessarily of the same Christian communion as the local manifestation of church being studied. The interpretation which is the goal of the study may then emerge between the investigator and the group, and the result is expected to be transformative and not just descriptive. Investigators and members of the community observed create a shared habitus and so develop a ‘bodily’ wisdom beyond the merely conceptual.\textsuperscript{35}

In a session at the recent Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, the sociologist Kathleen Jenkins spoke movingly about research as a spiritual practice, relating her participation in the pilgrim-

\textsuperscript{35} Recently the term ‘action-research’ has appeared to describe this kind of approach. See Claire Watkins and others, ‘Practical Ecclesiology’ in Ward (ed.), Perspectives, 167-81. For an example of the method in operation see the report Living Church in the Global City: Theology in Practice (London/ Cuddesdon: Heythrop College and Ripon College Cuddesdon, 2008).
age of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, and the ethnographic study she made of pilgrims there. She was clearly deeply involved, including giving foot massages to the weary travellers, and spoke of being affected and changed personally by the experience. But she insisted that her tools of sociological analysis had not been changed, and these gave her the kind of distance she needed to listen carefully to people’s stories.\footnote{Kathleen Jenkins, speaking to the question, ‘Can Ethnography Serve Theological Purposes?’, joint session of the Religion and the Social Sciences Section and Ecclesial Practices Group, November 21, 2015; personal record.}

With respect, I suggest that for the ecclesiologist there will also need to be both involvement and distancing, but the stakes will be different. Even the tools of theological analysis may need to be changed through deep participation in the lives of those being studied. This is part of the risk of participating, not only in a human community but in the life of the triune God.