
The Threat of Ambiguity: Risk and Faith in Relational Ethnography and Interdisciplinary Dialogue

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Mary Douglas has identified the discomfort people feel in circumstances of ambiguity. For social groups, both informal and institutionalized, the wish for what Douglas calls “hard lines and clear concepts” (1966:200) can create in-groups that are self-referential and oppressive. While boundaries are integral to any community, I suggest that social groups must interact with one another with a sense of ontological permeability that is rooted in dialogical relationship in order to both transcend and affirm their boundaries appropriately. The same is true between ethnographers and those they study. In this paper, I will draw on a conversation I had with several young Norwegian Christians I interviewed during field research conducted at the Grimstad Bible School in Southern Norway to illustrate how reflexive ethnography and transcultural dialogue can be conducted with a sense of both risk and faith. I will also argue that both ethnographic work and interdisciplinary discourse can benefit from creating permeable boundaries, and that in order to do so, academics from all disciplines will need to let go of the myth of objective reporting and embrace the possibility of finding a sense of what John Milbank would call moving from “unity to difference” and back.

*Svez:*¹ Well, of course you have to [judge others] in a right way.

Me: What would that look like?

Svez: Like, coming in like a loving person. I do not like when people say, “you are not to judge.” Of course you’re not to judge like God does, but I kind of like judging. [All laugh]. But, I do!

All communities, whether they be social, political, or institutional, require boundaries that protect shared goals, agreements, and ontological frameworks. The parameters of these boundaries, however, need to maintain a sense of permeability, or in-groups risk becoming oppressive and may relegate dissenters into the position of “the other.” The negotiation between clear boundaries and permeable borders necessitates a sense of “judgment,” as my informant Sven said, but can present a place of psychological discomfort for community members. Similarly, the blurring of boundaries between ethnographer and informant, and opening of dialogical channels in interdisciplinary discourse can be accompanied by a sense of ambiguity which can feel compromising. In addressing the question of how the wish for clear boundaries influences identity, I will draw from the ethnography I

conducted at a youth festival called the “Tenåingsfestivalen” (“The Teen Festival”) held at the “Bibelskolen i Grimstad” (“The Grimstad Bible School”) in Southern Norway. I will illustrate how this negotiation can be mediated through a dialogical relationship like the one shared between my informants and myself that was rooted in a sense of both vulnerability and responsibility.

Methods

The coast of Southern Norway is a brilliantly beautiful place. Having attended the Grimstad Bible School that overlooks the craggy splendor of the North Sea a dozen years ago, I returned to the quaint fishing village where my mother was raised to conduct field research in the summer of 2017. For me, this assignment posed both an exciting challenge to attempt to catalogue data from a subculture that I had in many ways been a part of, and a place of apprehension in returning to an epistemological plane that was once familiar to me but had shifted with age and experience.

Most of my interlocutors were in their early twenties, and serving as leaders at the annual teen camp at the Grimstad Bible School where I would conduct my

¹ All names of interlocutors have been changed to pseudonyms.

research for the week-long event. I was welcomed wholeheartedly, and was granted full access to this community, in large part I suspect because of my status as a former student, but also because this was a teen camp environment in which attenders are encouraged to make connections quickly. Trust was established almost instantly: the Bible school staff and camp leaders alike were eager to share their insights about both their cultural and theological commitments, and I spent the week feverishly recording interviews, filming public worship meetings, and generally feeling a bewildering sense of integration and loneliness, much in the way I did when I attended the Bible school as the only non-Norwegian many years ago.

Traditionally, ethnographers have had to exist in the liminal space between objective observer and subjective participant, and I found this tension to be disorienting. How could I emotionally disinvest from interlocutors with whom I felt very aligned, in an effort to remain “objective” in my reporting? How much of my own story was I willing to risk sharing in an effort to be subjective and reciprocal? In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz writes that anthropology is the “enlargement of the universe of human discourse,” (1973:8) and that interpreting culture should take us to the culture’s “heart” (1973:11). This process of interpretation should create a sense of appreciation of perspectives that are fundamentally different than our own, and give us a deeper understanding of our interconnectivity as humans. To be sure, this method of interpretation is easier said than done; Geertz writes, “...Power, Change, Oppression, Faith, Work, Passion, Authority, Beauty, Violence, Love, [and] Prestige . . . [are the] ‘big words that make us all afraid’ and it is our fear that makes us avoid interacting with them” (1973:13), thus rendering “cultural analysis . . . intrinsically incomplete” (1973:18). During my fieldwork, I felt ignited, welcomed, alive, and most certainly at times, afraid. Studying theology and anthropology and attempting to draw appropriate lines between the two disciplines felt deeply challenging, and researching a culture in which I was simultaneously an “insider” and an “outsider” of required a sense of reflexive ambiguity that, at turns, felt threatening and liberating.

James Clifford asserts in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, “Insiders studying their own culture offer new angles of vision and depths of understanding. Their accounts are empowered and restricted in unique ways” (1986:9). This is not to say that the process of insider reporting was an easy undertaking for me; consistently, I found myself having to navigate false assumptions on behalf of both my informants and myself. Often, my informants believed that I shared their conservative views simply because I had previously attended the Grimstad Bible School—

which was predominantly not the case. While these differences between us could have caused a sense of perplexity and disillusionment, I was cognizant of the situation and attempted, to the best of my ability, to remain both vulnerable and appropriate in my interviews. And while I certainly felt a sense of being empowered, coming into my field research with some pertinent background information at my disposal, I also felt restricted by how close to the bone much of my material was for me. I brought some “baggage” into my interviews, having had a personal stake in communities similar to my informants’. Yet I also brought insight because of my common background with theirs. I often saw myself in my informants, and understood intuitively how their faith shaped their social and cultural realities.

Thus, in this article I have elected to include the questions I asked my informants along with their responses in my written record. I want the reader to interact with the tenuous, dynamic nature of ethnographic work, which I believe presents a more authentic approach than more “objective” forms of research. In my interactions with my informants, I presented myself as a person with opinions of my own. This method addressed dynamics of power (the observed and the observer), relationship (deference and disclosure), and reciprocity (knowing and being known) between us. I become a part of the conversation, and “leveled the playing ground” by choosing to disclose pieces of my life in order to challenge some of the ideas of my informants, or to encourage a greater depth of understanding or relationship between us. I knew that I was walking the line in many ways, but the risk was worth it; I feel that the moments of self-disclosure indicated in our recorded conversation were an important part of the narrative, and my informants were able to trust me more because I exhibited my own trust and vulnerability towards them.

“Hard Lines and Clear Concepts:” Negotiating Boundaries in Christian Culture

According to Marthe, the primary leader of the Tenaringsfestival, the annual summer camp exists to “share God’s love” with Norwegian teenagers living primarily in the Southern and Western coastal regions of Norway. Most attendees are from conservative Christian backgrounds, but Marthe described the camp as being “open for everybody.” Indeed, even I was to be included in the category of “everybody”; Marthe asked that I become a youth leader for the course of the week, a role which would make participatory observation especially exciting. Despite Norway’s status as a culturally “Christian nation,” with the majority of Norwegians maintaining membership in the state-sanctioned Church of Norway, most Norwegians,

Marthe told me, have a relaxed relationship with religion if they are to have one at all. As such, practicing Christians, particularly those from more conservative Church communities, comprise a subculture both at odds and agreement with dominant Norwegian culture, which is firmly secularized and decidedly liberal.

The paradoxical nature of divergent moral codes propagated by Norwegian liberalism and Christian conservatism was one that presented a place of tension for several of my informants. In the following exchange, I record a conversation I had one afternoon with several male leaders from the camp's music team. We had been speaking about various topics, and the conversation turned towards boundaries within the conservative Christian culture of the young men; one leader, whom I will call "Sven," offered an example of how this tension between liberal and conservative attitudes regarding sexual politics in Norway is part of both his relational reality, and a larger issue that Norwegian conservative Christian communities interact with on an institutional level. He told us that one of his classmates at his Christian school who was a musician in his band was gay. I asked him,

Me: How did you deal with it, having a gay man playing music on your team?

Sven: I told my principal that he didn't have any friends because he's probably one of the few that wasn't a Christian. He said it was okay. He didn't want him to play in church, only at the school when we had some small gatherings.

Me: Did you feel that that was wrong?

Sven: Sort of. We talked a lot about it. I also brought him with me to church once or twice. And he told me, "I want to leave out that I'm gay. And I do not want to believe [in Christianity]." So that's why my principal said he couldn't lead.

Me: So maybe if he had said, "I'm gay, but I want to believe," then it would be a different story?

Sven: Yea, I believe so. Yes.

Me: Do you think that people should have to choose between their sexuality and their faith?

Unison: No.

Benjamin: No, I don't believe that. But I believe that it's not our job to judge. But I believe it when the Bible says it. I guess I'm considered a conservative kind of guy with the Bible. So I believe in everything that is written in the Bible, but I also believe it's not okay to judge.

Sven: Well, the Bible does tell us to judge.

Benjamin: Well yea, it does. Well, not to judge, but help guide the way.

Sven: And that has a huge meaning . . . it means that you can actually say, "it's wrong what you do." But you have to "have your house in order" if you're going to be able to judge.

Freddy: But no one "has their house in order."

Sven: Some people are sex addicts. Some people are not. I believe that a person who is not—say that I am a sex addict—could tell me that I'm doing wrong. According to the Bible, there's nothing wrong with that.

Me: Can I interrupt you? I don't know if I'm supposed to do this, but I want to interrupt you, and I want to say that, if you're a sex addict, you have bigger fish to fry. You are probably in a world of pain, and you are probably wishing for a way out. So if someone is coming to you to say, "you're wrong and this is why," is that going to help?

Sven: Well, of course you have to do it in a right way.

Me: What would that look like?

Sven: Like, coming in like a loving person. I do not like when people say, "you are not to judge." Of course you're not to judge like God does, but I kind of like judging. [All laugh.] But, I do!

Me: People do!

Sven: Well, people do but I feel like, less than before. I hate the new age-ish relativism. I think it's stupid. Cuz it ruins Christianity, ruins beliefs. Because you can say you believe in "The Green Man in the Sky," and I have to say, "Oh, you do!" because that's right for you. Oh man, please don't. I want to be able to say that, in a good way, "you're wrong." I dunno. Do you know what I kind of mean?

Me: I totally know what you mean. You're talking about wanting an absolute truth and wanting to say with conviction, this is what I absolutely believe is true.

For my informants, the conversation around sexual morality revealed their wish for an objective stance amidst disagreement. It also illustrated how debate should be conducted: with mutual respect amidst dissent. In another portion of our interview, Sven admitted that his clear views on sexual morality were in part because of his own past "failures" in which two of his former girlfriends had become pregnant and had abortions. When I asked him if he felt that "rules kept him safe," he nodded vigorously. "Oh, yes!" he said, emphatically, "I really do."

This psychological desire for articulated boundaries is a circumstance about which Mary Douglas wrote extensively in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. She writes, "the yearning for rigidity is in us all. It is part of our human condition to long for hard lines and clear concepts. When we have them we have to either face the fact that some realities elude them, or else blind ourselves to the inadequacy of the concepts" (1966:200). She adds,

"[there is] cognitive discomfort caused by ambiguity. Ambiguous things can seem very threatening" (1966:xi). The "threat" my informants did not wish to interact with was that of sexual anarchy, a boundless sense of limitless choice, or an epistemological framework that could be readily renegotiated. Similarly, Sven voiced frustration in the "relativism" that is present in Norwegian culture; for him, acknowledging all belief as equally viable presented an ontological fallacy and "ruined" the validity of his own faith system.

Relationship and Responsibility in Reflexive Ethnography

Alternatively, my own experiences with similar conservative Christian communities regarding teachings on sexuality and gender had presented a place of "unsafety" for me, and while my informants were not a part of these specific communities, the similarities felt close enough that I found myself asking my interlocutors questions that were influenced by my own background. I could not assume that my experiences were completely congruous with those of my informants, but I needed to know more fully where their boundaries were laid, I suppose in an attempt to offset some of the ambiguity I was feeling myself concerning the parameters of my relationship with them.

Me: Do you think that there could be some shame around sexuality in the church, particularly against women?

Sven: I do.

Me: It's kind of a leading question . . .

Sven: It is.

Me: Is it more acceptable for boys to screw around, "Ah, but you're forgiven!" but for a girl, "Oh, you have to be a virgin when you get married!"?

Benjamin: I haven't even thought about it. Or talked about it.

Sven: Well, it's like it doesn't have to be in the church at all, it's everywhere.

Benjamin: In society. It's not the church's fault . . .

Me: But I do think the church does teach that it's a mistake, whereas the dominant culture will say, "Oh it's actually okay to experiment when you're young and have fun." I do think that the church has a different message, right?

Benjamin: Well I think that the church, a good church, will always try to lead you away from sin. And if we're gonna think of it as sin, then we're always gonna try to get past that moment. And I think there are a lot of good leaders out there that can do that in a loving way, where you don't feel ashamed, and don't feel condemned. I think leaders can help you look past [mistakes] and

say, "God has so much more for you, just get past it."

Me: I think it's actually really important to talk about sexuality because spirituality and sexuality are very close to each other. In terms of talking about someone who is gay, or maybe living with their partner, or divorced, I think there's a lot of confusion in the church. I'll talk personally for a minute. I live with my partner, we've been together for eight years. And I experience a lot of what I feel to be God's love through having an intimate relationship with someone I'm not married to. So when questions about leadership in my church came up, there's been some pushback: [I said,] "I'm not gonna lie to you! To me, lying is not of God." So I don't think our relationship is sinful, but I've definitely felt pushback from people. And when I was your age, I definitely felt the way that you feel about it. But my life didn't go the way I thought it would.

Benjamin: Sometimes what happens, happens. And like in divorce we're talking through the process with the people that are involved and the leaders in the church. "Okay, is there anything we can do, any way we can help, anything we can fix? Okay, if it's not, we'll help you through the process. We're gonna take care of your children, we're gonna help around."

Me: So it's socially accepted?

Benjamin: Yea, I believe it's socially accepted.

Me: How about getting remarried after a divorce?

Sven: I do not like it. Because we're accepting it. It's so stupid.

Me: Why do you say that?

Sven: Because God tells us through the Bible how He wants it to be. And we always like, step between the white lines. Why do we do this? Ah, it's so stupid.

Benjamin: Of course there is forgiveness for everything.

Sven: And that's stupid, too.

Benjamin: Well, it's "the backup plan."

Sven: There's always "the backup plan."

Me: Ah, so "I'll try to get it right and if I don't, Whoop! I'm forgiven."

Sven: Yea. Basically because people don't have a personal relationship with God. So they tell themselves, "Yea, I do believe." But if you believe that Jesus is God and was a person, I do believe you'd change your mind and change your ways because, if I promised to Benjamin...

Me: [Interrupts] . . . never to play in any other band ever again. [Laughs].

Sven: Right, I would seriously try to, because he's right there, he's watching me, we're talking. So I would do my best. And if I sinned, I would really

be sorry. But if it's God, and I really don't have a personal relationship, and I don't really know if He exists or anything, I don't really know if He cares at all, if I make a mistake I believe that He forgives me, it's okay.

Me: So people justify what they do?

Unison: Yes.

Sven: Yea, because people don't know that He's real. If He's not, then whatever.

Me: So what I'm hearing you say is that your experience of God, whatever that may be, you have this conviction that, because of this relationship that you have, you feel that there is a responsibility. And it sounds like it's confusing to you when people say that they have that same relationship but don't have that same responsibility. Is that what you're saying?

Sven: Yes, basically.

At first, I was perplexed by Sven's assertion that marriage after divorce was "stupid"; upon further questioning, it became clear that he meant that he felt there should be a sense of responsibility to what he believes are God's rules for people who claim to have a relationship with God.

This interview clearly demonstrates the challenge I encountered of reconciling expression and restraint in reflexive ethnography. I knew that my informants would likely have different views than my own, and as such I would need to strike a balance between disclosure and discretion. I was aware that our conversations could devolve into debate, which would impede the process of getting to the "heart" of their culture and would do little to honor their perspectives. I also did not want to deceive my informants by presenting myself in such a way that they thought I was in full agreement with them; I felt doing so would create a false sense of relationship, and if I was asking that my informants share vulnerably with me, I felt it appropriate to, selectively, do the same for them. I chose to include an aspect of my personal life, pertaining to my status as unmarried but living with my partner, because I felt that it was both a critical point of my perspective in terms of sexual politics within conservative Christian culture, but more importantly, because this disclosure presented an avenue for my informants to interact with the challenge of negotiating the limits of our shared belief in real time. There was an underlying current of interpersonal assessment on behalf of both myself and my informants that weaved its way through our conversations, a wish to mediate the "threat of ambiguity" and to establish how we could view the other. Similarly to Sven's belief that relationship with God predicates responsibility, so too did my newly-formed relationships with my informants require an accountability of my own: to record their

perspectives accurately and relationally, which would mean that I would have to view them subjectively rather than objectively, however risky that challenge might have felt.

The Myth of Objective Reporting

The myth of "objectivity" within the scientific community has long presented a place of respite for scientists interacting with the liminal nature of research. But objectivity is not a universal concept; rather, as Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison write in *Objectivity*,

Scientific objectivity has a history. Objectivity has not always defined science. Nor is objectivity the same as truth or certainty, and it is younger than both. Objectivity preserves the artifact or variation that would have been erased in the name of truth; it scruples to filter out the noise that undermines certainty. To be objective is to aspire to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower—knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgment, wishing or striving. Objectivity is blind sight, seeing without inference, interpretation or intelligence. (2007:17)

The possibility that fieldwork could be conducted objectively is, of course, a myth, but it is an attractive one; there is a sense of cognitive safety found in bypassing the emotional risk of relational reporting. Intersubjective ethnography is risky, and, like all fields of inquiry, requires an element of faith. Daston and Galison write, "The twentieth century struggle aimed to maintain the scientific image while recognizing the corrosion of faith in an objectivity vouchsafed by an aspiration to an automatic transfer from object to paper . . . it is about a faith, also new, that assessments of images could be made in ways that relied on a scientific self, one reducible to neither failures nor victories of the will" (2007:313). In fact, this wish that the scientific community has historically had to access an absolute reality free from "failures" or "the will," is a wish that my informants shared regarding their own Christian ontology and morality. Sven expressed it most clearly in his complaint that relativism is "stupid" and "ruins Christianity." Daston and Galison write, "All epistemology begins in fear—fear that the world is too labyrinthine to be threaded by reason; fear that the senses are too feeble and the intellect too frail . . . Objectivity fears subjectivity, the core itself . . . [but] subjectivity is not a weakness of the self to be corrected or controlled . . . it is the self" (2007:372-373).

If it is the self that confronts the illusion of objectivity, and the fear inherent in epistemology, then it is also the self that becomes fundamental in relational ethnography. Clifford writes,

Some reflexive accounts have worked to specify the discourse of informants, as well as that of the ethnographer, by staging dialogues or narrating interpersonal confrontations . . . This ‘dialogical mode’ . . . locates cultural interpretations in many sorts of reciprocal contexts, and it obliges writers to find diverse ways of rendering negotiated realities as multisubjective, power-laden, and incongruent. In this view, “culture” is always relational, an inscription of communicative processes that exist, historically, between subjects in relations of power. (1986: 15)

I was cognizant of the power inherent in my role as ethnographer during my research, even if it was minimal. I do not believe that my informants viewed me as especially powerful, but they were very eager to speak to me, and this gift of both enthusiasm and vulnerability was one that I did not take lightly. I was also aware of my wish to extricate any sense of failure or “victory of the will” from my ethnographic record. But because my research was undeniably relational, I could not remove myself from the narrative. By including the questions I asked my informants, and my responses to them, I risked seeming amateurish, flawed, wrong; the wish to finesse my written record is even now a strong one, despite how much insight I believe the dialogical method brings. I also admit that my informants had a certain sense of power over me, in that they were observing me as much as I was observing them, and in effect, this intersubjective relationship informed how I conducted my interviews with them. I think showing parts of myself to my informants, even if so doing presented a risk of “failure”, was worth it; I believe that it was both my sense of familiarity and my bent toward reflexivity that led to the intimacy I felt with my informants, which in turn led to an exchange of information that felt reciprocal and mutual.

Theological Insights on Unity, Difference, and Faith

Much has been written about the debate between objectivity and subjectivity in the ethnographic method, but there remains little current discussion of the role of faith in the conversation. “Faith” as a universal concept does not seem to be particularly popular in the scientific community; it is no wonder that it is a word that is included on Geertz’ list of “big words that make us afraid.” But in my experience, relational ethnography *required* faith: between myself and my informants, most certainly, but more abstractly, in a unified reality that existed beyond us. Here, John Milbank’s work on the theological relationship between unity and difference is significant. Referring to the Trinity, he writes in

Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason that, “God as the infinite series of differences” moves from “unity to difference, constituting a relation in which unity is through its power of generating difference, and difference is through its comprehension of unity” (2006:430). The comparison between Trinitarian reciprocity and human dialogue might not be a seamless one, but for the Christian, the concept of being created in the “image of God” lends itself to a humanity that can achieve unity despite difference. When I shared my personal experience of feeling like the “other” in my own church community, my informants responded with a sense of understanding, despite disagreeing with the particulars of my beliefs. And while my admission was risky, in that I was highlighting an emotionally-loaded point of difference between us, I believe that the risk was worth it because my informants and I were in a relationship that created space for the tension between our unity and difference(s). It was a powerful moment in my ethnography, and it gave me further insight into the practical morality of my informants, as well as the community to which they belonged. It also required faith for both my informants and me: we had to trust each other in a way that required risk, but also gave us the opportunity to develop a real sense of our shared humanity.

In Joel Robbins’ article entitled, “Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship,” he notes, “today anthropology is not a discipline much given to finding radical otherness in the world or to using that otherness as a basis for hope” (2006:292). Robbins continues, “Theology, not only in Milbank’s hands but also in those of other political and social theologians . . . possesses a commitment to the reality and force of otherness we no longer find in ourselves” (2006:293). In anthropology, the study of religion has been characterized by reductionism due to most anthropologists’ de facto atheism. But Robbins argues that,

[Anthropologists] should take on the challenge to find real otherness at the fundamental level of social ontology, but that we need not adopt the Christian mythos which underlies the other ontology Milbank promotes. We need, instead, to ground the other ontologies we bring to the discussion in the way we always have—by finding people who live in their terms and describing how they do so. (2006:292)

The state of social “otherness” is, as Robbins asserts, “fundamental”, but it is also a reality that can be transcended by a faith that serves to “ground... other ontologies” by generating a respect for differences and a trust that unity can be achieved despite them. This relationship with “difference”,

based in a Christian faith, was one that Victor Turner utilized in shaping new ways to approach ethnographic theory. In *The Slain God*, author Timothy Larsen quotes Turner, a Catholic, as writing, “At one time I employed a method of analysis derived from Durkheim via Radcliffe-Brown [to study religion] . . . But I found that ritual action tended thereby to be reduced to a mere species of social action” (2014:189). Instead, Turner decided to approach religion as “not determined by anything other than itself” (2014:189). With this framework, Turner developed the concept of *communitas*, or “social anti-structure.” Larsen writes that *communitas* was a “key concept [defined as] a spontaneously arising phenomenon where a group of people begin to relate to one another just as fellow human beings without regard to any differences of status, and experience mutual love and interconnectedness. Liminality fosters this.” (2014:192). *Communitas* is the liminal space between different structures, a flexible plane where transitions occur and authentic relationship can be formed, where a sense of “otherness” can be mediated by a shared humanity.

In my conversations with my informants, a sense of this liminality was present along with a feeling of personal connection despite our brief time of knowing each other. My informants expressed that it was not only their relationships with each other that gave them a sense of community, but also their phenomenological encounters in which they experienced “God’s love.” The field of anthropology has long grappled with explaining experiences such as these. In an article called, “Dreams from a Saint: Anthropological Atheism and the Temptation to Believe,” Katharine P. Ewing writes, “in order to preserve a stance of what he or she imagines to be professional involvement, an ethnographer may place the act of observing and recording between himself or herself and others . . . [and] even in experimental ethnographic writing, the anthropologist rarely budes from this subject position into the embarrassing possibility of belief” (1994:571).

In my case, I could not, realistically, preserve any great distance between my informants and myself, in part because, with a background so similar to theirs, I could understand implicitly why they felt the way they did on various points, but also because I could not fully create the “anti-structure” of *communitas* between us if I insisted on discounting their experiences. Taking the statements of my informants at face value removed the power from my position as ethnographer, and placed it where it should have existed, that is, between us. And while we may have disagreed on many points, whether theological or moral in nature, what was more important was that we were able to create a sense of unity in our differences.

Just as communication between the informant and the ethnographer must be dialogical and subjective in nature, so must discourse across disciplines remain free of power dynamics. This does not, however, mean that there should not be a refinement of debate in interdisciplinary dialogue; rather, a sense of critical judgment should be fostered, but always within the context of relationship. The risk the academy faces in accepting alternative ontologies is likely based in a fear that the boundaries of theoretical framing will become so permeable that the discipline will lose its identity, but I would argue that welcoming disparate voices to the table will strengthen, rather than weaken, anthropological scholarship. This means that anthropologists can benefit from balancing debate with what Brian Howell would describe as a sense of “mystery” in embracing the perspectives of “the other”. Howell writes,

As anthropologists continue to work through the epistemological turn, mystery provides an opportunity for imagination. For the mystery of God is not unlike the mystery of otherness in the social encounter. Where anthropologists have often turned to “embodied knowing” as a remedy to the solipsistic subjectivism of positivism and objectivism, mystery pushes us towards a transcendent knowledge of self and other. That is, it proposes a kind of knowledge that is not reducible to social interaction, existing in a kind of superstructure or supraculture realm. (2017:47)

In their discussion on whether Christians should judge others’ behavior according to the Bible, my informants said that in order to provide sound judgment, those who are in the position of judge must “have [their] house in order.” This is an adaptation from the Bible verse, I Timothy 3:5, and is often used colloquially in Christian circles to illustrate how the spiritual journey requires one to work on one’s own shortcomings before casting judgment on the actions of others. Freddy responded, “no one has his house in order,” and I believe his rather astute observation can be applied to many of the issues that I have attempted to address in this article: no one is perfectly equipped to conduct ethnographic work, and none of us are wholly free from prejudice, or influence, or the wish for the apparent safety found in objectivity. And yet, we must stand in the gap between judgment and compassion, with our informants, with our research, with our faith agreements, whatever they may be, and with ourselves. As Sven said, judgment must be cast in “the right way,” with love. His assertion is an apt point for how interdisciplinary dialogue should happen: through meaningful conversation that balances sound judgment with a sense of relationship. Only then are we

equipped to honor both the differences and unity between us with grace, humility, and a bit of faith that we can trust the other to assist us in illuminating the mystery of the human experience.

Conclusion

One of my most powerful moments in my field work was when Freddy said to me, “Jamie, I really like talking to you. I know that you disagree with me in some ways, but you don’t make me feel stupid. I appreciate that.” Somehow, I had managed to communicate with Freddy in the way that I had hoped: by allowing myself to be known, but also, by interacting with his beliefs in a way that made him feel respected. I am sure this was not always the case, but his comment reinforced one of the central lessons I learned in my fieldwork: relationship is the antidote to impermeable boundaries that lock out “the other.” It is what creates a sense of responsibility to our informants, and dispels the myth of objective reporting. Likewise, the academy has a responsibility to create a milieu where critical, dialogical discourse is generated and theory is engaged from a variety of ontological perspectives rather than a homogeneity of thought.

Disagreements are uncomfortable, and being asked to examine and reorient our ontological boundaries for the sake of “the other” is a negotiation that can challenge who we are on a fundamental level. But what my young informants taught me during my field research is that dissent is not only possible, but critical to maintaining healthy communities that are oriented towards a “unity [that] is through its power of generating difference, and difference [that] is through its comprehension of unity” (Milbank 2006:430). While the threat of ambiguity presents problems for all of us, I believe that anthropology and theology have insights to gain from exploring a dialogical relationship, as “awkward” as it may be. This means that theologians and anthropologists alike must be especially vigilant in considering the perspectives of “the other” (while having their own ontological houses in order, so to speak) so that we may position power where it should exist: shared between us. Only then can relational ethnography and interdisciplinary dialogue occur in a way that makes the risk of subjectivity worth it.

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