

Fieldwork in Theology

*Exploring the Social Context
of God's Work in the World*

Christian Scharen



Baker Academic

a division of Baker Publishing Group

Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Scharen, Christian, 1966–

Fieldwork in theology : exploring the social context of God's work in the world / Christian Scharen.

pages cm. — (The church and postmodern culture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-4930-9 (pbk.)

1. Theology—Methodology. 2. Pastoral theology—Fieldwork. 3. Bourdieu, Pierre, 1930–2002. 4. Postmodernism—Religious aspects—Christianity.

I. Title.

BR118.S325 2015

261—dc23

2015007078

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15 16 17 18 19 20 21 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To Robert N. Bellah, 1927–2013
in memoriam

Contents

- Series Preface ix
- Series Editor's Foreword *James K. A. Smith* xi
- Preface xv
1. Fieldwork in Theology: *Waking Up to the World God Loves* 1
 2. Rigorous Self-Reflection: *Bachelard, Science, and Sin* 31
 3. Embodied Perception: *Merleau-Ponty and the Incarnate Body* 49
 4. Practical Logic: *Bourdieu and the Social Art of Improvisation* 65
 5. Surrendering to the Other: *Wacquant and Carnal Sociology* 91
- Epilogue: *Understanding as a Spiritual Exercise* 111
- Index 115

Series Preface

Current discussions in the church—from emergent “postmodern” congregations to mainline “missional” congregations—are increasingly grappling with philosophical and theoretical questions related to postmodernity. In fact, it could be argued that developments in postmodern theory (especially questions of “post-foundationalist” epistemologies) have contributed to the breakdown of former barriers between evangelical, mainline, and Catholic faith communities. Postliberalism—a related “effect” of postmodernism—has engendered a new, confessional ecumenism wherein we find nondenominational evangelical congregations, mainline Protestant churches, and Catholic parishes all wrestling with the challenges of postmodernism and drawing on the culture of postmodernity as an opportunity for rethinking the shape of our churches.

This context presents an exciting opportunity for contemporary philosophy and critical theory to “hit the ground,” so to speak, by allowing high-level work in postmodern theory to serve the church’s practice—including all the kinds of congregations and communions noted above. The goal of this series is to bring together high-profile theorists in continental philosophy and contemporary theology to write for a broad, nonspecialist

audience interested in the impact of postmodern theory on the faith and practice of the church. Each book in the series will, from different angles and with different questions, undertake to answer questions such as, What does postmodern theory have to say about the shape of the church? How should concrete, in-the-pew and on-the-ground religious practices be impacted by postmodernism? What should the church look like in postmodernity? What has Paris to do with Jerusalem?

The series is ecumenical not only with respect to its ecclesial destinations but also with respect to the facets of continental philosophy and theory that are represented. A wide variety of theoretical commitments will be included, ranging from deconstruction to Radical Orthodoxy, including voices from Badiou to Žižek and the usual suspects in between (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Foucault, Irigaray, Rorty, and others). Insofar as postmodernism occasions a retrieval of ancient sources, these contemporary sources will be brought into dialogue with Augustine, Irenaeus, Aquinas, and other resources. Drawing on the wisdom of established scholars in the field, the series will provide accessible introductions to postmodern thought with the specific aim of exploring its impact on ecclesial practice. The books are offered, one might say, as French lessons for the church.

Series Editor's Foreword

The Church and Postmodern Culture series was conceived and launched in the heady days of Radical Orthodoxy's braggadocio and the "emergent" church's hip humility. In both cases, French theory was invoked alongside Stanley Hauerwas to either exhort the church to "be the church" or as a catalyst to "rethink" church. In many and various ways, postmodernism turned out to be an occasion for a renewal of interest in ecclesiology. People were less and less interested in an abstract "Christianity" and more concerned with an embodied "church."

But there was a problem: this "church" turned out to be no less abstract. All kinds of beautiful, marvelous, transformative, even magical powers were attributed to this "church"—it was variously an alternative society, a haven from liberalism, an outpost of the kingdom, a community of reconciliation, and more. It sounded like another country. We couldn't wait to go there. Sign me up! What's the address? Or if you were part of the emergent crew, your goal was to "plant" this church.

So we showed up. And then the disappointment settled in. It turned out that this "church" was going to be a little harder to find. It didn't seem to exist anywhere we could find on our terrestrial maps. While all kinds of grand claims were made

about this “church,” we started to wonder if it only existed in John Milbank’s head.

It was right around this time that I read what I consider a landmark article by Christian Scharen. Published in 2005 in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Scharen’s essay, “‘Judicious Narratives,’ or Ethnography as Ecclesiology” was a game-changer for me. Echoing work in his first book, *Public Worship and Public Work: Character and Commitment in Local Congregational Life* (2004), Scharen pointed out the idealized nature of the church in so much of the recent enthusiasm for the formative power of “the church.” As Scharen noted, a lot of folks who spent lifetimes in local congregations sure looked an awful like their neighbors who didn’t. While some theologians want to deflect such “empirical” concerns with a priori provisos, Scharen’s questions seemed exactly right: if you’re going to make grandiose claims about “the church,” isn’t it fair to ask if any actual churches do what you claim? Any theology that refuses Gnosticism needs to be somehow accountable to empirical realities. As soon as I read this essay, I knew I wanted Scharen to publish a book in the Church and Postmodern Culture series.

As Scharen notes in this new book, the tempering of ecclesiological magic is only the flipside of cultivating a healthy, intentional, theologically sensitive attention to “the world.” Theology *as* ethnography complicates any easy bifurcation between church and world without simply eliding the two. This is honest theology that can still be a gift to the church—or more specifically, to real, tangible, messy congregations you find down the street.

There is more than one way for theology to take the “turn to practice.” If a “MacIntyrean” version of this has been centered around Hauerwas, Milbank, and others, there is an alternative stream of “practices-talk” that is more bottom-up and more appreciative of the contributions of the social sciences. Scharen’s work emerges from this stream and represents a constellation of sociologically sophisticated theology one finds at Emory

and Vanderbilt. (And while we tend to think of Duke Divinity School as a bastion of the MacIntyrean school, in fact we can find both schools of thought at work there, particularly in the work of Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Luke Bretherton.) While my own sympathies are with the MacIntyrean project, Scharen's convincing challenge has complicated that.

Fieldwork in Theology embodies exactly what we envisioned for this series ten years ago: "French lessons for the church." Scharen has provided an instructive primer on the influential work of Pierre Bourdieu and along the way helps us appreciate the significance of lesser known French theorists who influenced him like Gaston Bachelard. But all of this is with a view to equipping pastors as ethnographers of local contexts—and of their own congregations—in the service of mission. It's precisely why I think this book should be required reading for every doctoral program in the country and am grateful to have it as part of the Church and Postmodern Culture library.

James K. A. Smith

Preface

While the world is facing dramatic challenges—including perhaps most dramatically the crisis of global warming and its many and diverse environmental impacts—many traditional churches in North America and Europe seem stuck in a myopic focus on their own declining institutional life. If vitality is to find a way in these older traditions and emerge in new church movements, it requires looking outward to inquire how God is at work loving the world and acting for its good amid real burdens and brokenness. This looking outward is just what the craft of fieldwork in theology has in mind, and so I offer it as a tool toward “getting involved” in what God is doing in the world.

In a way, this book is the latest effort in a hope for the integration of theology and social science, a hope I gained from my first teacher in sociology, Robert N. Bellah. Titled *Fieldwork in Theology*, this book aims both to articulate such an approach and to show why it matters for understanding the church as a concrete or lived reality in and for the world. The book centers on Pierre Bourdieu, whose own academic training was in philosophy, yet he became one of the most significant social scientists of the twentieth century. In addition, his trajectory from philosophy to social science served as both prelude and

impetus for a shift in theology. Whereas theology had for many centuries turned to philosophy as its main conversation partner, theology since the 1960s has experienced what Kathryn Tanner has termed a “turn to culture.”¹

In order to help make sense of his significance for theological work, the book spells out some key influences on Bourdieu’s development as well as how his work takes root in one of his students, now a prominent sociologist himself. All along the way, the book tries to hold in tension the key ideas of important thinkers and the sometimes unexpectedly fruitful use such ideas might have for the church and its leadership.

At many religious studies programs, divinity schools, and theological seminaries, doctoral programs (PhD and DMin especially) increasingly require or allow their students to pursue projects including fieldwork. Such programs typically “borrow” social science methods for gathering data and then engage in theological reflection on the data. Work in theology has alternatively critiqued such “borrowing” and moved ahead with it uncritically. Recently, however, new efforts have emerged that aim to articulate an approach called “theological ethnography,” or what I am here calling “fieldwork in theology.” This approach has shown itself to be very attractive to students. This book has been written to serve a student audience but will hopefully also circulate among teachers and pastors generally as a practical aid in their ongoing vocation in their respective institutions.

The “theological ethnography” approach has also gained an audience among a network of scholars—both theologians and social scientists—here in the United States as well as in various countries beyond. I am glad if the book serves scholars who already, or who hope to pursue, such theological research.

1. Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner, eds., *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

However, beware: those looking for a how-to book for research will not find it here. This book is in many ways a textbook about method, but it is really a preliminary discussion of what one is doing when, as part of a theological project, one does fieldwork. In that sense it is similar to Bourdieu's own book on the craft of sociology, which he subtitled *Epistemological Preliminaries*. The book is not without any practical helps for doing fieldwork, however. I discuss examples of exemplary fieldwork, and one of the best ways to learn is to carefully watch (or read about) the fieldwork projects of good practitioners of the craft.

I am conscious of the disjunction between the complexity of the material I cover and the limitations of an accessible and brief book. A desire for wide use drives my choice here regarding accessibility and brevity, and some readers will rightly want more. For them, I have included many footnotes to encourage deeper engagement. In addition, I am planning a companion volume tentatively titled *The Theo-logic of Practice*, in which I will take up the same range of issues at much greater depth.

Last, I am grateful for the support of colleagues, friends, and family along the way in my formation as a theologian and social scientist and in the process of writing this book. There are many, and I trust they know who they are and that I deeply appreciate them. One central person to my formation in social science, whom I can no longer thank personally, is my first teacher in sociology and my first coach in fieldwork, Robert N. Bellah. My years at the Graduate Theological Union and the University of California Berkeley were an intellectual watershed for me. My intellectual trajectory was set during those years, and Bellah's passion and insight were a crucial part of it. I went on to study at Emory with Bellah's student and long-time collaborator Steven M. Tipton. Steve took over where Bellah left off, taking me deeper into the great literature of Western social thought and coaching me in the craft of fieldwork. They conspired to publish *The Bellah Reader* a few years ago and

included in that volume a section on sociology and theology.² This offered recent evidence of what I already knew: these two disciplines animated the life of this brilliant scholar and churchman, and he wrestled, unsatisfied with the disciplinary divide holding them apart. May this little book contribute in my own way to the rapprochement for which he hoped.

2. Robert N. Bellah and Steven M. Tipton, *The Bellah Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 451–522.

Fieldwork in Theology

Waking Up to the World God Loves

Whether you've never heard the name Pierre Bourdieu or you've already read some of his highly regarded yet quite difficult writings, this chapter puts Bourdieu in context, introduces the contours of his social science, and situates it in relation to the theological challenges of the church in a secular age. First, however, a musical prelude to lead us into the chapter's main themes.

A Prelude from John Legend and The Roots: “Wake Up, Everybody”

“Wake up, everybody, no more sleeping in bed.”¹ Forty years later, the urgency of this classic 1970s soul tune comes alive as

1. “Wake Up, Everybody,” on John Legend and The Roots, *Wake Up!* (New York: Columbia, 2010). The song is a cover of Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes' 1975 song of the same name written by John Whitehead, Gene McFadden, and Victor Carstarphen and memorably sung by Teddy Pendergrass.

John Legend and Melanie Fiona's vocals soar above the funky beat laid down by The Roots. A closing guest appearance by Chicago hip-hop artist Common adds provocative rhymes. Originally written in the activist spirit of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the song is the center of gravity for an album inspired by the 2008 United States presidential election season, when so many people engaged the political process for the first time. Despite its contemporary musical and lyrical feel, the song draws on a biblical urgency. Saint Paul, writing in Romans, echoes Jesus's summary of the law "in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:9–10). He then appeals to his fellow Christians to "wake from sleep," for salvation is near, the night far gone, and it is time to "put on" the works of Christ in the struggle for a world healed and made new (vv. 11–12).

Under the swinging groove of bassist Owen Biddle, the verses of "Wake Up, Everybody" progressively "wake up" the people who can respond to the troubles of the world: "So much hatred, war, and poverty." First, Melanie Fiona calls out to "wake up all the teachers," who are to teach in a new way. The youngest, she croons, are our future, those whose world we are making today. Next, John Legend sounds the wake-up call for "all the doctors" to make the old people well. The latter are, he reminds us, the ones who have suffered a long road of this-worldly troubles, and they deserve to be cared for in their final years. Fiona then encourages all the builders to wake up and "build a new land." She clearly casts a wide net here: the song implies we are all builders. Common picks up the theme, trying to "write a song as sweet as the Psalms." He acknowledges the "earthquakes, wars, and rumors" but claims a powerful identity able to fund the call for renewed work for good. We are, Common pleads, "more than consumers, we're more than shooters, more than looters." Instead, we are "created in [God's] image" so that God can "live through us."

The album as a whole carries the urgency set by the title, *Wake Up!* Take the first track on the album, an intense cover of Baby Huey's 1971 soulful lament "Hard Times."² The picture of daily struggle is bleak: John Legend and Questlove tell us about hard times "sleepin' on motel floors / knockin' on my brother's door / eatin' Spam and Oreos and drinkin' Thunderbird, baby." Especially as a lament sung out of the African American experience, the song echoes the real-life struggles of people barely making it day to day. But in keeping with the empowerment of the times—both the activist era of the 60s and early 70s, as well as the swell of political participation in 2008—the final song of the album, "Shine," strikes a hopeful note.³ Granted, it is a song John Legend wrote for Davis Guggenheim's film *Superman*, a film depicting the brokenness of America's public school system. Yet Guggenheim's film finds strength and hope in focusing in depth on several students, and Legend's song picks this up. "So dark, but I see sparks, if we don't snuff them out / We gotta let them flame / Let them speak their name / Let them reach up to the clouds / Let them shine." The yearning of Legend's voice and the soft intensity of the music echo the song's words in reaching for hope. Together they offer a powerful combination of hope and urgency summing up the album as a whole.

Speaking about the genesis of the album, John Legend describes how inspiring it was to watch young people during the 2008 presidential election, many empowered for the first time to join the political process and thereby seek a better world. The album was recorded as a gift to these young people and attempts to connect the dots from the socially conscious soul

2. "Hard Times," on John Legend and The Roots, *Wake Up!* The song is a cover of Baby Huey and the Babysitters' 1971 song of the same name on *The Baby Huey Story: The Living Legend* (Chicago: Curtom, 1971). Curtis Mayfield wrote the song for Baby Huey and produced the album. After Baby Huey's untimely death in 1971, Mayfield released the song himself as well as track 6 on *There's No Place like America Today* (Chicago: Curtom, 1975).

3. "Shine," on John Legend and The Roots, *Wake Up!*

music of the civil rights era to the new birth of activism today.⁴ Rather than simply give in to the lowest common denominator of music stars seeking individual celebrity and enjoying conspicuous consumption, The Roots and Legend attempt to show a collaborative, communal approach to making music, a process less about their own egos and more about the world they fervently desire to live in.⁵ Indeed, they go so far as to make the theological claim that in this shared work for good, God lives through us. The songs, the album as a whole, and the musicians behind it offer a bridge into this book, itself a call to “wake up” to the challenges facing the church in responding to the needs of the world God loves.

What Is Fieldwork in Theology?

The church, along with humanity and the earth as a whole, faces deep challenges we are unlikely to meet without just such collaboration, imagination, and passion. My own church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and churches of North America are emerging from a long history of empire. What some have called the “era of Christendom,” begun with Constantine’s vision at Milvian Bridge outside Rome in 330 CE, has dramatically ended. Admittedly, in some places, such as in the American South or in my own area of the country, the upper Midwest, the intoxicating aroma of Christendom’s opiate haze lingers, blinding people to the sharp contours of the church’s new relation to nation and creation. But across the

4. Gene Demby, “The Birth of a New Civil Rights Movement,” in *POLITICO Magazine*, accessed January 22, 2015, http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/12/ferguson-new-civil-rights-movement-113906.html#.VMFHmorF_Wc.

5. Angus Batey, “John Legend and the Roots: Hearts, Minds and Soul,” in *The Guardian*, October 19, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/oct/19/john-legend-roots-interview-obama>. See also Questlove, *Mo’Meta Blues: The World according to Questlove* (New York: Hachette, 2013).

North Atlantic nations, including Europe, North America, and their far-flung influences, especially Australia and New Zealand, First World Christians face a new reality. In response, there is a new vitality of mission. Christians are asking how they might “wake up” to the Spirit’s invitation to get involved in God’s love for the world and share in the passion of Jesus Christ in the midst of suffering, healing, reconciling, and doing justice. I will now turn to these themes regarding our social reality today. They provide the crucial context for and urgency of the central argument of this book.

However, before turning to describe this context more fully, I need to pause and state clearly my argument in the book. In doing so, I will briefly sketch the theoretical and theological territory covered in the chapters to follow, offering a view of the forest before we follow the trail through the trees.

Vitality of Christian faith today does not—and *does*—depend on us. Let me explain. Our capacity to live, breathe, and engage in our daily tasks, let alone our ability to find healing and new life in the midst of sin and brokenness, depend fully on the mercy and love of God who comes near to us in the passion of Jesus. Yet as we are met and marked by this Holy One, God’s Spirit animates our faithful attempt to be such mercy and love for all who suffer—people as well as the creation. Here the argument of this book comes into play. Turned from sin and joined to God’s mission of loving and healing the world, how do we as Christians, the body of Christ, understand the complexity of this beautiful and broken world? My argument is that the task of understanding requires a careful, disciplined craft for inquiry—a craft I call fieldwork in theology—if one seeks both to claim knowledge of divine action and to discern an appropriate human response. The social science of Pierre Bourdieu, in both its origins and influences, offers a way to do disciplined fieldwork in theology leading to clarity of understanding. This may serve the Spirit’s call for the church to get involved in what God is doing in the world.