

PASTORAL BEARINGS: LIVED RELIGION AND PASTORAL THEOLOGY

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Pastoral Bearings signifies a culmination of major shifts in the field of pastoral theology in a number of ways. First, religious practice is no longer viewed as the prerogative of the religious community or its officially sanctioned leaders alone, whose interest may be the maintenance of a set of ideological tenets. Religious practice is now viewed as a complex set of lived experience by which the participating persons in it exercise their agency and navigate in the religious geography that is informed by the experience of the past, present, and other contexts (Bevans, 2002). The changing religious topography in the United States coupled with the decline of mainline Protestant communities is likely to have contributed partially to this change. *Pastoral Bearings* is an excellent example of a collection of pastoral contextual theology in action that addresses the empowerment of individuals and their postmodern context-dependent meaning-making processes (cf. Patton, 1993; Ramsay, 1998; Lartey, 2006).

Second, pastoral theology has become an increasingly interdisciplinary field just as other academic disciplines have. *Pastoral Bearings* is a much-needed collection of works that illustrates the diverse postmodern empirical methods available for pastoral theologians. The importance of empirical methods is self evident in that pastoral theologians are concerned with lived religious practices and experiences. How one makes sense of these practices and experiences begins from the experience of seeing, hearing, or touching the phenomenon in question. When research is based on researcher observation or perception, critical questions arise about the quality and trustworthiness of what the researcher experiences or perceives. In quantitative research methods, researchers use the terms *validity* and *reliability* to describe various aspects of similar concerns. In *Pastoral Bearings*, ten qualitative studies by eleven authors are reported. These studies employed various qualitative methodologies including narrative analysis, ethnography, autoethnography, interview, grounded theory, case study, and so on, although the authors did not always specify their methodological groundings. The distinction between methods and methodologies is important but is not within the purview of this brief review, except that the researchers' reporting of their work seems to suggest that they reduced qualitative research methodologies to research methods. More is said about this below.

Pastoral Bearings is an important addition to Moschella's (2008) text which introduced ethnography as a pastoral practice. A couple of additional texts are available which are intended for students in Doctor of Ministry programs to use for their capstone projects (Savage & Presnell, 2008; Myers, 2000). Doctoral students in practical theology are using a qualitative research approach for their dissertations more frequently, for good reasons; but there is a dearth of texts written by pastoral theologians on this topic.

Pastoral Bearings attests to the growth of interdisciplinary research in pastoral theology, as in many other academic disciplines, and therefore is a welcome addition to the pastoral theology literature. I would add that resisting the need for interdisciplinary research or resorting to simplistic and rigid fragmentation of academic disciplines would be tantamount to pigeon holing human knowledge or an attempt to iron out complex human lived experience into “a thing to be grasped” (Philippians 2:6), which carries a mark of idolatry (Lee, 2001).

Third, *Pastoral Bearings* demonstrates par excellence the *critical* nature of pastoral theology. In my assessment, no theology is simply *descriptive*. All theological endeavors are *critical* and *action oriented*. Some pastoral theologians may argue that only liberation theology or feminist/womanist theology, for example, is action oriented and critical. They may argue that their task is to describe simply what they see or reason without any sociopolitical agenda. I would argue, as most of contributors in *Pastoral Bearings* illustrate in their chapters, that the line between *descriptive* and *critical* is no longer tenable. Theology as context-dependent, by nature, functions as a critique of society and culture. Along this line, Fulkerson uses an ethnographic (and/or autoethnographic) approach to illustrate how Christian theology is reformulated at the site of perceived conflict or contradictions in a lived situation. In doing so, she critically examines and reformulates the role and function of Christian tradition. This would be “the empirical principle” of pastoral theology, a significant contribution to the reconstruction process of Christian tradition (Poling, 1995, p. 116). Most contributors in *Pastoral Bearings* advocate for and give voice to the congregation in difficult coping (Scheib and Hedges-Goettl), the ill (Dunlap), the homeless (Thornton), the differently abled (Schaller), the Baptist women (Campbell-Reed), “the spiritual but not religious” (Heriot), the Jamaican Mennonite Christians (Yoder), the independent evangelical charismatic in Ghana (Acolatse), and the Buddhist monks in the United States and Thailand (Sorajjakool). In this regard, all contributors are *critical* pastoral theologians who engage themselves in critiquing the religious and theological normative. Their work *moves* the reader, an outcome of their action-oriented research.

Critique of *Pastoral Bearings*

Curiously, three chapters (Scheib and Hedges, Yoder, and Sorajjakool) take on explicitly different shades of being *descriptive* even if the authors provide their location out of which they speak. It is possible that they are attempting to exercise an “objective or neutral stance” toward their subject matter. In the context of this volume, however, nothing can be read as ‘business as usual’. Three editors set the tone of the volume’s introduction by asserting that pastoral theologians wrestle “with issues of power, cultural diversity, and religious pluralism” (p. 1) within the web of “political and social structures affecting both the individuals and communities who seek and offer care” (p. 4). Against this framing of the book, Sorajjakool’s chapter appears to challenge the Christian positionality in pastoral theology; Yoder seems to take the reader to the non-mainstream Protestant community in Jamaica, giving voice to the rarely heard; and Scheib and Hedges are perhaps critiquing the denomination’s failure in the life of a congregation and

also giving voice to the resilient congregation in Atlanta. These theological stances or positions are not explicitly stated.

It is true that rigorous researchers need to suspend their judgment as best they can about their subject matter, approaching it as if they encountered it for the first time. Husserl, known as the “father” of phenomenology, called it *epoche* (a Latin term that means bracketing or suspending), and Moustakas (1994) operationalized it in his transcendental phenomenology. Postmodern insight informs us, however, that there is no such thing as an objective or neutral stance. Whether we state it or not, we have no choice but to speak out of our positionality. Even quantitative researchers and the staunch supporters of scientism would be hard pressed if they reject the fact that all knowledge is context-dependent, partial, and politically sensitive. For this reason, I suggest that pastoral theologians not be shy in showing forth their researcher stance. This requires more than stating their location as identity markers. Researchers need to be more transparent and document their reflexivity in relation to their subject matters. This is a crucial component of qualitative inquiry and pastoral theology.

Interdisciplinary research in pastoral theology is noted as a significant shift. Researchers are cautioned however in their borrowing of interdisciplinary empirical methods in a haphazard fashion. Contributors in *Pastoral Bearings* do not fully report the empirical methodologies and methods they used, although this failure is seen in varying degrees. The reader is left in a quandary, not knowing how to evaluate the conclusions or outcomes of these studies. Often, three evaluative criteria are cited in evaluating scientific research: rigor, internal consistency, and fruitfulness (Seale, Gobo, Gubrium, & Silverman, 2007, p. 1). The reader may ask, “In what ways does the reported research demonstrate the rigor with which the research was conducted?” Without fuller description of the standard by which the data are collected and analyzed, the reader cannot evaluate whether the reported lived experiences of research partners serve as illustrations or trustworthy generalization within the study. Research findings, though incomplete, when supported by theological claims can have power to control the reader’s perception and belief. Researchers must do all they can to be true to “advertisement” and not to produce the kind of incomplete knowledge described in 1859 by John Stuart Mill as the tyranny of half-truths.

Different forms of qualitative approach reflect different philosophical assumptions, worldviews, and theoretical lenses (Creswell, 2007). No study in *Pastoral Bearings* addresses these issues. These methodology-related groundings are important and must be questioned, especially in terms of whether the researcher’s theological stance is compatible with the assumptions imbedded in the employed methodology. In Acolatse’s study, for example, I may raise the question of compatibility between the Barthian theology and the postmodern interpretive ethnographic approach.

I also take issue with the three-part organization of *Pastoral Bearings*. I would argue that the critical pastoral theological construction which the authors use must be equally applied to their own, perhaps, invisible intent. It was stated that pastoral theologians wrestle “with issues of power, cultural diversity, and religious pluralism” (p.

1) within the web of “political and social structures affecting both the individuals and communities who seek and offer care” (p. 4). When we consider this statement as a most important aim of the book, does the organization of the book mirror this priority? How is it that Part III is titled “Intercultural *Nuance* [emphasis added]”? Does this mean that non-U.S. religious lived experience is a variation of the U.S. normative? How is it that in numerous pastoral theological edited volumes, the non-U.S.-based research is often placed at the end? What does it say that congregational studies are placed in Part I? What does it say that the first study in *Pastoral Bearings* is written by a (systematic) theologian (a chapter, by the way, that I enjoyed very much!)?

Concluding Words

Pastoral Bearings is a significant contribution to pastoral theology. It ushers in perhaps a new era in terms of pastoral theological methodology. *Pastoral Bearings* advances the field of pastoral theology significantly by providing ample examples of how interpretive qualitative approach can be effectively used in pastoral theological research.

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