Managing Positionalities when Researching Healthcare Chaplaincy

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a reflection on my position as a scholar of religion without an active personal commitment to faith, and the concomitant approach to the relationship between theology, sociology and religious studies that was developed when contemplating the implications of my positionality. With reference to my experiences of research with acute healthcare chaplains, I will elaborate on the use of practical theology in response to varying participant reactions to my positionality, and as a corrective to dominant healthcare chaplaincy discourses. It was therefore necessary to consider the challenges of engaging with theology without a personal commitment to faith, as well as the tensions between theology and sociology. Practical theology is also expounded as a method of engaging with variousreligious worldviews, rather than imposing a unilateral normative framework on the understandings of healthcare chaplains. It is through adopting practical theology and highlighting its points of convergence with sociology and religious studies that new contributions can be made to the fields of theology, religious studies and the social sciences.

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The insider/outsider debate tendsto focus on whether a researcher can understand and reliably report the phenomenon under study. The questions raised are primarily epistemological, yet the position of the researcher also has a significant impact on research relationships and how participants perceive the researcher. This is evident when it is not entirely clear what constitutes 'insider' or 'outsider' - identities that are associated with 'familiarity' and 'strangeness' respectively. Consequently, these debates must be considered in terms of relationship and positionality, rather than perpetuating the oversimplified 'insider'/'outsider' dichotomy.

In this paper, I will explore how theology and sociology, typically presented as 'insider' and 'outsider' approaches to religion respectively, canbe used together to account for my own positionality, where the degree of familiarity and otherness in relation to religion is variable. I will reflect on my position as

a researcher who does not have a personal commitment to a faith community, the assumptions participantshave made about my position as a researcher, and how these informed the methodological decisions underpinning research on healthcare chaplaincy. My current researchfocuses on the status and integration of minority faith groups in acute healthcare chaplaincy, which aims to examine strategies by which chaplaincies respond to growing religious diversity and the experiences of minority faith representatives involved in chaplaincy. This is primarily a response to the discourses constructed by Christian chaplaincy practitioners, which are yet to adequately consider the voices of minority faith representatives. In particular, I will focus on the 'interpretative repertoire' or recurring trope of the 'marginalised chaplain', as we shall see below.

Managing Positionalities When Researching Healthcare Chaplaincy

During an undergraduate degree in Theology and Religious Studies, I made a gradualshift away from my Baptist background towards identifyingwith "negative" atheism (Martin 2007, 2; Flew 1976, 14). I remain cautious of the connotations of 'atheism', which has often led me to identify as 'agnostic' to mitigate the associations of the former. My experiencehas some similarities with patients that healthcare chaplains encounter, given the decline of formal religious affiliation, particularly church attendance and membership, in recent years (Swift 2013; Davie, Heelas and Woodhead 2003; Guest, Olson and Wolffe 2012).

Prior research in healthcare chaplaincy introduced me to the recurring trope of the institutionally 'marginal' and 'peripheral' chaplain in relation to the church and NHS (Swift 2014; Ballard 2010; Swift, Hancocks and Sherbourne 2008). Thisportraitinitially resonated strongly with my own experience of alienation from the church. However, the misleading nature of this discourse became more apparent following an examination of the role of Christian chaplains in contrast with minority faith representatives in chaplaincy. Unlike their Anglican and other Christian counterparts, the role of minority faith groups in chaplaincy has never been assumed: institutional marginality is felt acutely, yetfaith community links tend to be exceptionally robust. Consequently, while I empathisedstrongly with the'marginal' chaplain, a bigger picture has emerged which demands the inclusion of marginalised voices in chaplaincy discourse (see Noblett 2002, 89).

Interrogating Dominant Healthcare Chaplaincy Discourses

Healthcare chaplaincy research is a nascent field, primarily comprising contributions from practitioners, with few significant exceptions (Beckford and Gilliat 1996; Orchard 2001; Gilliat-Ray, Ali and Pattison 2013). Thus my contribution is nestled within a small knowledge base that is produced by so-called 'outsiders'. My alleged 'unfamiliarity' is compounded by my lack of involvement in a faith community and my status as a non-practitioner. Significantly, contributions to the literature by chaplaincy practitioners of other faiths are rare: Christian contributions purporting to discuss 'multi-faith

chaplaincy' tend not to be informed by 'insider' understandings of minority faith representatives in chaplaincy. The perspectives of these representatives are subsumed undercurrent chaplaincy discourses.

These discourses have also established practical theology as an avenue for chaplains to understand themselves and the relationship between belief and chaplaincy practice (Cobb 2004, 14; Newitt 2010, 169, Swift 2014). Practical theology uses social scientific method toexplore the practical implications of beliefs and is primarily concerned with evaluating the "everyday performance of faith" in society (Swinton and Mowat 2006, 4). Thus practical theology provides a useful tool for chaplains to reflect on the theological aspects of theirworkin a crisis setting(Swift 2014, 158).Here, I suggest practical theology can assist with challenging dominant chaplaincy discourses, while social scientific method can help examine the everyday performance of faith from perspectives outside the Christian tradition**.** First, I will explore responses to my position as researcher, before making a more detailed case for drawing on theology for a study on healthcare chaplaincy.

Constructing Identities: Accounting for Participant Perceptions

Despite identifying as having 'no religion', it is common for research participants to assume that I am Christian. Some participants construct a Christian identity for me, either implicitly or explicitly, without requiring any prompts to do so (except thatI am a researcher in Theology and Religious Studies). During the observational component of my first empirical study, a Muslim chaplain advised me to inform other participants that I "come from a Christian background" and withhold further detail about my position. It had seemed odd that, after informing this participant that I was 'agnostic', I was requested not to make full disclosure about my position. An alternative identity hadexplicitly been constructed for me. On reflection, this was understandable in light of 'hard' secularist hostility towards religion, whereby identifying as an 'agnostic' or 'atheist' could impact on the extent to which participants can trust me as a researcher, particularly if those who do not belong to a religious community are perceived as a threat.

It has also been common for interviewees to *implicitly* construct an alternative researcher identity by framing their answers based on an assumption that I am Christian. For some, I becamea bastion of church orthodoxy or practice that is either to be challenged or feared. One chaplain, when criticising dogmatic rigid approaches to pastoral care,commented "I'm sure many people would shoot me for saying this, you included maybe."A degree of familiarity with Christian theology was accurately assumed, but mistaken for theological orthodoxy.This incident raised the question of how participants perceive me, the extent to which I should correct misapprehensions, and whether my position should be clear from the outset.

Participant Responses to Researcher Disclosure

Instead of making assumptions about my background, some participants directly enquired about my 'faith background'. My identification as being 'non-religious' or 'agnostic', or sometimes 'atheist'wasmet with mixed responses. In a conversation with a hospital porter, disclosing my position had meant that I was no longer a researcher observing the use of a sacred space, but instead an opportunity for *da'wah*(translated as 'invitation to Islam'). The porter would visit the faith space I was observing daily to tell me his views about the Hereafter, with repeated exhortations to read the Qur'an.My position had elicited a *theological* response, indicating a concern for my salvation.

Additionally, when making enquiries about chaplaincy provision, some chaplaincy team leaders expressed caution about my agenda, while others have been enthusiastic to assist, even when it was clear that I was not working from a faith perspective. This mixed reception may be explained due to Christian healthcare chaplains being caught between caring for those who have lapsed from religion, and dealing with secularist challenges to their position in state funded public institutions (Swift 2013, 251).Therefore, participants may respond to my position entirely on practical terms – indicating caution about a hostile secularist agenda - or on theological terms – where their perception is influenced by what a faith community teaches about 'outsiders' (see Gilliat-Ray 2005,23).

Engaging in Theology: The Promises and Pitfalls

It has already been established that practical theology can assist with interrogating the chaplaincy narrative, and that participant perceptions can take a theological dimension. Consequently, practical theology is proposed as a method for engaging with healthcare chaplaincy and understanding the perspectives of various faith communities involved.There has been a growing recognition that theology and the social sciences can offer each other useful dimensions for the study of religion. The contribution of theological language to our understandings of religious realitieshas been acknowledged (Helmer 2011, 250; Flanagan 2003, 433)rather than dismissed as abstract triviality. In this section I will briefly conceptualise theology, negotiate the challenges and opportunities for collaboration between theology and social sciences, and explore the contentious issue of normativity. Then, a critical conversational model of practical theology and participant encounter will be proposed for resolving the problematic.

Reconceptualising Theology: Beyond Christian Confines

The perception that theology is 'confessional' - done by Christians for Christians - pervades attitudes to the discipline in the Western academy. As a Theology and Religious Studies undergraduate, I was encouraged by my lecturers to engage with theology as an 'outsider': all that was required was 'critical empathy'. This encouragement disappeared at postgraduate level, with many accounts of how to 'do' theology presupposing active participation

in Christian communities (see Ballard and Pritchard 2006; Mudge 1987).Notable, although rare,exceptions include Ford's suggestion that "theology…is not only practiced within religious communities but also by many who are beyond such communities or in an ambivalent relationship with them" (2005, 63). However, few attempts have been made by 'outsiders' to articulate how this kind of engagement can take place. Thus, theology has centred on (a) insider accounts, (b) academic theologians and (c) the agenda of Christian communities. The remainder of this paper will address these questions.

The idea of theology as an activity of academic theologians has given way to a broader trend which focuses on 'lived religion' in general (Orsi 2010, xxxvii; Ammerman 2007), and 'ordinary theology' in particular (Astley 2002). Religion and theology are no longer seen as homogenous entities operating independently from lived experience: instead religious authorities arein dialectical relationship with communities of practitioners, and social life more widely(Woodhead 2005, 135). Theology is moved out of its academic ivory tower and can now account for everyday expressions of belief by 'ordinary' believers (Astley 2002), but also – in turn - acknowledges the social location of theologians (Gill 1996, 97). In particular the development of practical theology represents a new preoccupation with situating theological endeavour within the everyday activities of the church. Theology is no longer solely the domain of academics.

Additionally, I suggest that theological endeavours are evident in Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism and even Buddhism.[1] For the purposes of this paper, theology is conceived as the mechanism by which religious and faith communities understand themselves, other belief systems, the place of humanity in the universe, and their relationship to a higher power or reality (Gross 2000, 56; Jackson 2000, 2; Ford 2005, 61), apprehended – for example – as God, YHWH, Allah, Brahman or even sunyata(emptiness). Therefore theology is an enterprise that also occurs within non-Christian faith communities, and its application to other faith communities is not an attempt to 'Christianise' other religious traditions (Jackson 2000, 3). While the tension between theology and sociology mostly arises from Christian academic theology, we can acknowledge that conversations between non-Christian theologies and sociology may further enrich the conversation.

Thus theology has been reconceptualised to account for everyday aspects of belief, while recognising that theological endeavours can occur outside Christian communities. Now I will explore ways in which theology and social sciences can work together, drawing together the threads of a practical theological model of engagement.

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[1] Gross (2000) defines Buddhist theology as "working with and thinking about ultimate reality" within a Buddhist framework, over against the descriptive scholarship common in the study of Buddhism.

Negotiating Fault Lines: The Mutual Caricaturing of Theology and the Social Sciences

We have seen above that practical theology has been advocated as a methodof examininghealthcare chaplaincy and, having reconceptualised theology, enablesnew voices to inform theological enquiry. Practical theology takespraxis, lived experience and the contemporary situation seriously, through critical dialogue with formal and informal religious self-understandings of faith communities. This method of 'critical correlation' creates an arena whereby sources of theological authority, the social sciences and the contemporary situation enter into conversation (Tracy 1983, 62-63; Swinton and Mowat 2006, 79).

However, the relationship between theology and the social sciences has historically been antagonistic, fuelled by caricatures that are used tojustify continued disengagement.Sociologists have assumed that theology "[taints] 'objective' knowledge with personal faith or uncritical assent to doctrine" while working in an "empirical vacuum" (Helmer 2011, 251-253). Conversely, some theologians have insisted that theology cannot be questioned by empirical accounts of social realities. Theology is claimed to be the "queen of the sciences", whilethe social sciences are co-opted to affirm a pre-existing theological agenda (Beed and Beed 2010, 28), or disregarded as 'anti-theology' (Milbank 1993; Bretherton 2012, 171). Normative religious claims are treated as incontrovertible: they are "fundamentally matters of faith" (Lewis 2011, 169)

These perspectives seep into practical theological approaches to the social sciences. Despite using social scientific methods for data collection in practical theology, some intimations of the epistemological superiority of theology remain.In some instances, data collection methods have been appropriated into the practical theological agenda without any indication that such methods are undergirded byepistemologies that sit uncomfortably with normative theological claims. Overall, Christian theologians have rarely engaged meaningfully with the constructionist epistemologies undergirding qualitative interviews and ethnographic methods (see Whitehead 2004, 21; few exceptions include Sremac 2010 and Hermans 2002). Within the field of practical theology, Swinton and Mowat (2006) respond to these challenges by claiming that theological claims are exempt from social scientific analysis and interrogation. It is unsurprising that sociologists are reluctant to engage with Christian theology, with prominent proponents still asserting the privileged, revelatory status of theology. The critical correlative method, while so hospitably allowing other disciplines a place in theological inquiry, continues to do so on uneven territory that ultimately privilegestheology.

Managing Multiple Normativities

The role of normativity in Christian theology has been the primary point of contention in the above debate. Cameron et al. propose a promising model of the four theological voices, where the 'normative' voice is situated

alongside'operant' (theology in practice), 'espoused' (theology as articulation of beliefs),and 'formal' (theology in the academy)voices (2010, 54). The espoused and operant voices are seen in ordinary everyday approaches to theology (Astley 2002). These elements are mutually informative, anddo not *necessarily* rank formal and normative theology any more highly than espoused and operant theologies. This approach to normativity allows for a researcher to operate among and between multiple normativities, even if the norms of the researcher differ from the norms of the researched*.* This methodology is amore flexible approach to theological normativity than the aforementioned sources in practical theology.

Having acknowledged the role of multiple theological voices and normativities, it is suggested that Pattison's model of critical conversation enables the involvement of researchers who do not participate in a religious tradition. Pattison proposes a conversation between three distinct voices: the presuppositions of the researcher, the Christian tradition, and the contemporary situation (Pattison 2000a, 230). Each voice is allocated equal authority (Cameron et al. 2010, 26), thus moving away from the tendency to privilegeChristian normativity. Here, the critical conversation enables outsiders to engage with the theological tradition without necessarily presupposing faith on the part of the researcher. While Pattison refers to the Christian tradition, we might also consider broadening the dialogue between the presuppositions of the researcher, the contemporary situation and *any given religious tradition and its self-understanding*. Nevertheless, Pattison stresses that the relationship between theology and the social sciences must be clarified from the outset. Practical theology must properly engage withthe epistemological challenges presented by other disciplines before co-opting social scientific methodologies, while defending itself against a "paradigm takeover by quasi-scientific methods" (Pattison 2007, 264).

A critical conversational methodology within the field of religious studies expounded by Orsi (1995) builds on the intersubjective approach to the study of religion. Here there is some confluence with Pattison's critical conversational modeland the turn to reflexivity in sociology. This approach acknowledges the subjectivity and bias of the researcher while allowing the researcher to become open to the "radically destabilising possibilities of a genuine encounter" (Orsi 2005, 198). As the research into healthcare chaplaincy progressed, it became apparent that the idea of 'genuine encounter' was apposite. Chaplains encounter patients, staff and visitors who hold values and beliefs that are very different to their own, and their ability to connect with each person is enabled by focusing on 'common humanity'. When examining the phenomenon through the lens of intersubjectivity, encounter and conversation, the boundary between insider and outsider that classically defined whether one was doing theology and religious studies has been rendered problematic. Instead, researchers are encouraged to reflect on the more complex issues of positionality in relation to specific encounters with research participants.

Concluding Remarks

My experiences in chaplaincy research, from research participants constructing identities for me to the mixed reception to my own location in relation to religion, prompted me to reflect further on how positionality influences methodology. Theology has been reconceptualised as a discipline that can provide sociological studies with additional insights into the self-understandings and expressions of faith communities beyond Christian churches. However, theology also provides a significant way of understanding that participants' responses to researchers can be as theological as they are pragmatic.While mindful of questions of normativity, the methodological points outlined above demonstrate a concern with taking the norms of faith communities and individuals seriously while inhabiting my own position with integrity. My reflections on positionality echo the concerns of chaplains regarding their encounters with patients who are from all faiths and none. This is a third space of 'genuine encounter' between chaplains and patients/staff/visitors of all faiths or none can connect, where multiple normativities co-exist in a third space of integrity and respect, with occasional moments of discomfort and destabilisation. It is through addressing the misconceptions surrounding theology and the social sciences, recognizing multiple normativities, and considering reflexivity, that theology may be more welcoming to those without a personal commitment to a religious tradition, while working in meaningful partnership with the social sciences.

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