1 Introduction: On Sociability and Method in Theological Research

Whatever else it may be, religion under the pen of a scholar is always also the scholar’s own construction. That construction will be conditioned by each particular scholar’s personal background and experience, as well as by the particular ways through which she or he has sought to control for those limiting conditions. The present volume recognizes these challenges and seeks to address them head-on by explicitly inviting us, the contributing authors, to reflect on our own research backgrounds and orientations and how they filter our scholarly analyses in as self-aware a manner as we can.

A perhaps curious acknowledgement must, however, come along with the selection of this hermeneutical approach. Not only does it resist the top-down assertion of concepts and scholarly paradigms from some outside source onto peoples and their traditions that are animated by unique forms of life and deserving of their own correspondingly specific presentation. That very resistance is the methodological conclusion of denying that scholars can ever capture the ‘essence’ or articulate with complete ‘accuracy’ the beliefs, values, and practices that animate any community’s or tradition’s modes of life. This results in the awkward acknowledgement that the denial of universality sets the scholar at an equal distance from particularity, leaving the study of religion floating in a kind of outer-space-like limbo between seeking to neutralize as many of one’s own prejudices and universal concepts as possible, on the one hand, while affording untouchable uniqueness and independence to the communities and traditions one studies on the other.

A practical theology of the kind that seeks to develop an empirically founded and hermeneutically reflected theory of lived religion out of the highly particularized individual experiences of the individual scholar participants needs to address itself to this challenge. I want to suggest that a particular orientation to the dynamics of human ‘sociability’ is helpful for working through methodological challenges in theological research for practical theologians who are interested in a transcultural and transreligious approach to lived religion. Specifically, thinking of theological research as a sociable task can help theologians to inhabit the hermeneutical problem that arises in the tension between universality and particularity.

In this article, I define and then outline ‘sociability’ as meaningful participation in human community. To conduct theological research ‘sociably’ in the development of a hermeneutics of lived religion in diverse contexts requires unusual methods, specifically, embedded methods. This will raise questions related to the appropriate
degree of distance and involvement between scholars and communities. But it can also help us to reflect more deeply on the nature of what theology is, what it does and how it functions in and for communities. Paying greater attention to the dynamics of participation in community can help theologians in general and practical theologians in particular to thematize the phenomena that individuals and communities themselves identify as religious in a way that preserves a high degree of independence between scholar and subject, seeking to preserve the authenticity of both subjects’ experience and the scholar’s descriptive analysis. At the same time, practical theologians are called to the recognition that they continue to interpret those phenomena, contextualize them, and thereby participate in the process of producing them as historically positive traditions. An orientation to the sociable nature of theology leads not to lament or cynicism that this participation is unavoidable but rather to responsible recognition and engagement with it.

In what follows, I introduce Friedrich Schleiermacher’s early Romantic *Attempt at a Theory of Sociable Conduct* (Schleiermacher [1799] 2011) in part one as the primary reference work for the reflections on sociability and theological method outlined in parts two and three.

## 2 Schleiermacher on Religion and Sociability

In the spring of 1799, Schleiermacher was occupied with bringing his first major literary project to completion, namely, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. In this text, Schleiermacher theorizes religion as a “sensibility and taste” for the infinite, for the universe, and the cultivation of “feeling” for “the relation of humanity to it [the universe]” (Schleiermacher [1799] 1996, 23, 22, 19). Less well-known, however, is that he had already anonymously published, in the January and February 1799 issues of the Enlightenment periodical *Berlinisches Archiv der Zeit und ihres Geschmacks*, a text in two parts outlining an “Attempt at a Theory of Sociable Conduct” (Schleiermacher 2011).¹ In this latter text, Schleiermacher describes the experience of late Enlightenment *salon* culture, where in the context of open homes men and women of differing social classes, levels of education and professional engagements could interact on equal footing, engaging one another on issues of science, art, politics, religion, travel and any number of other topics. Through this exchange, one’s world expanded – opened to the universe, one might say – and new possibilities were created. The relevance of Schleiermacher’s “Attempt” to the writing of the *Speeches* is that Schleiermacher repurposed many of the arguments from his “At-

¹ For a philosophical contextualization of Schleiermacher’s essay in the German Enlightenment and overview of its broad reception in the twentieth century, as well as an interpretation of Schleiermacher’s theological development of the concept of sociability, see Robinson (2018).
tempt” for use throughout the Speeches, particularly in the fourth speech which he titled, “On the Sociable Element in Religion” (Robinson 2018).

In the fourth speech of On Religion, Schleiermacher calls religion “the most complete result of human sociability” (Schleiermacher 1996, 75). The reason for this is that Schleiermacher saw human experience as caught up in a perpetual dialectic between, on the one hand, encountering one’s own limitations and thereby being brought to an awareness of something more which surpasses and encompasses oneself or one’s community and, on the other hand, moving beyond the self into what Robert Orsi and Tyler Roberts have described as an excessive “more” (Orsi 2011, 97–104; Roberts 2006, 705–706) through interactive relationships with other persons and groups that can confirm, correct, or otherwise help one overcome one’s limitations. The latter movement, of course, quickly becomes a new instance of the former, and the process repeats. In other words, it is through a certain kind of participatory interaction with diverse others that individuals and communities develop themselves into particular individualities. This interaction possesses an inherently “religious” quality in the sense (and to the extent) that it is driven by an orientation, not only toward what exceeds the self, but toward giving a complete, integrated account of that excess and, finally, of all things. Every coming into community both is an attempt at giving such an account and, by virtue of its finitude, becomes a reaffirmation that one has not done so. While this is especially evident in communities traditionally identified as ‘religious’, it is true to some extent of all forms of human community in Schleiermacher’s view.

Sociable interactions thus constitute the primary site of religious formation for Schleiermacher. In order to understand this hermeneutical position, it will be helpful to summarize some of the main arguments of Schleiermacher’s theory of sociability. Long before a community becomes self-reflexively religious in the sense of intentionally seeking to develop a comprehensive orientation toward reality as such, individual persons and small groups perceive a fundamental need for what Schleiermacher theorizes in the “Attempt” as freie Geselligkeit, or “free sociability.” He writes, “Sociability that is free and not bound or determined by some external purpose is demanded by all human beings as one of their most primary and most noble needs” (Schleiermacher 2011, 165).⁴ Schleiermacher explicates this basic need by reference to commonplace experiences of professional and private life. The former brings with it the tendency to see and interpret life from the point of view of a predetermined interest and to implement the necessary methods for accomplishing a specific end. The latter tends to make life just as simple by means of routinization and habituation of behaviors and attitudes. Those who are “thrown back and forth” between these two modes find themselves in a situation not unlike that of the hapless scholar

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floating between unjustified universals and meaningless particulars: One’s view into the “diverse insights of humanity” – one’s understanding of what being human could be like, beyond the limits of one’s own circumscribed experience – becomes more and more narrow (Schleiermacher 2011, 165). These mutually compounding limitations give one the overwhelming sense that there must be some way to make these two complementary to one another such that the sphere of one individual is placed into a position where it can be intersected as diversely as possible by the spheres of other individuals, and each individual’s points of limitation can become viewpoints into another strange world for one another, so that all appearances of humanity eventually become familiar to one and even the strangest orientations and relationships become like friends and neighbors (Schleiermacher 2011, 165).

What is that way? ‘Free sociability’ (freie Geselligkeit). And what is free sociability? Free sociability is simply the thoroughgoing practice of reciprocity among persons in community with one another. The form of any freely sociable relationship, “should be a reciprocity that permeates all participants but that is also wholly determined and completed by them” (Schleiermacher 2011, 169). Schleiermacher then proceeds to outline the ideal form of free sociability as a thought experiment; if it were possible to implement this ideal in practice, it would mean: (a) that no external purpose or goal contextualizes the relationship other than the “natural tendency” (Schleiermacher 2011, 168) driving free sociability, namely, the drive to learn as much as possible about being humans; (b) that participants engage in a “free play of thoughts and feelings” as a method and form for revealing the group’s sum total of exposure to and insights into humanity (Schleiermacher 2011, 170); (c) that this form of exchanging thoughts and feelings itself also constitutes the material content for the exchange such that participants are sharing their own experiences with the others, who in turn draw upon their own experiences in reaction; (d) that all participants enjoy full, unimpaired freedom in sharing their own experiences and perspectives as well as commit to being transparent and comprehensive in their sharing in order that no exposures to humanity be held back, limited, or otherwise conditioned and covered; and finally (e) that all participants continuously engage in this reciprocal communicative practice until the ‘amount’ of humanity which the group collectively contains and can produce is exhausted.

Such reciprocity, as early German Romantics (like Schleiermacher) as well as German literary elites (like Schiller [1795] 1971) and Idealists (like Fichte [1794/95], 1982) were recognizing, is not simply an idea of taking turns, but a social and epistemological ethics, that, when fully developed, implies robust civic virtues and duties, including rights to self-determination such as free speech, public assembly, tolerant and open public debate, and transparency in civic institutions. Early classical sociologist Georg Simmel, who may have known Schleiermacher’s essay but only as an anonymous piece (possibly via Wilhelm Dilthey), saw the theory of sociability as a paradigm for the interpretation of basic social dynamics (Simmel [1911] 1997, 120 – 130), while later sociologists and philosophers in the twentieth century found in
this theory and the social form of the salon both an index of the evolution of a new form of public space (Habermas [1962] 1989, 43) as well as evidence for the functional differentiation of society under conditions of modernity (Luhmann 1980, 158). Even though Schleiermacher also uses the terminology of sociability more narrowly to refer to concrete settings of private life among family and friends, the form and practice of sociability create for him a kind of universal environment for human interactions and development in general. They outline basic conditions for the possibility of human beings learning about and realizing more fully the conditions of good life in pluralistic communities of the most diverse orientations and perspectives on the fullness of human life in the world in relation to the vastness of all things (Robinson 2018, 98–99).

3 Comparative and Ethical Aspects of a Sociable Paradigm for Theological Research

As a lens for theological research, a focus on human sociability does not offer any definition of what religion is, in some kind of essentialist sense. Rather sociability directs the attention toward the media through which the relationships which people regard as most meaningful and significant are formed, expressed, articulated, and circulated. That is, sociability directs the attention toward communications that form and maintain communities’ modes of life. And theological research participates unavoidably in these communications. In our interconnected, globalized present, the question is not how to avoid this form of sociability but how to engage in it responsibly and fairly in theological research. Personally, as a scholar with an odd pedigree in two disciplines that have often viewed one another with skepticism, if not downright antipathy – namely, Religious Studies and Christian Systematic Theology – my own view is that ideas and practices labeled ‘religious’, when viewed through scholarly paradigms, are to be treated as indeed non-necessary, historical accidents, but that scientific analysis of these things nevertheless functions as a normative, ethical task. Of course, many scholars of religion and Christian systematic theologians alike will find such a position deeply dissatisfying, though likely for opposite reasons. I would outline my reasons for taking it, in brief, as follows.

3.1 Communication-Based Theology Means Comparative Theology

As Ernst Troeltsch worried over one hundred years ago, “when Christianity is treated systematically, the historical-critical approach is abandoned” (Troeltsch [1898] 1991, 11). A sociologist, philosopher, and theologian, Troeltsch observed that Christian systematic theology has a long history of attempting “to validate the old authoritarian
concept of revelation” by means of focusing on “postulates, claims, theories of knowledge, or other intangible generalities” (Troeltsch [1898] 1991, 11). Troeltsch found especially frustrating that theologians would do this and simply ignore the serious questions posed to Christian theology from new findings in the natural sciences and humanities, not least among them, the emerging discipline of the History of Religions. He thus devoted extensive attention to the challenges raised by critical, historical inquiry for theological method, and his outline of the implications for theology of “the modern view of history” presents a moment of reckoning to theology echoing down to this day (Troeltsch [1898] 1971, 45). In his essay on Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology, Troeltsch presented three critical-constructive principles for a theological method that seeks to be as honest as possible about the limitations on the kinds of claims it makes, as informed by modern scientific methods (Troeltsch [1898] 1991, 13–14): (1.) historical judgements are judgements of probability not certainty; (2.) facts and events can only be defined in historical and sociological analysis by means of distinctions, analogies and comparisons; (3.) and any knowledge at all is conditional upon the presupposition of an interconnectedness, and thus non-randomness, of all historical phenomena. For theology, this means it should seek to describe phenomena in an orderly, measurable manner that can be checked, verified, and criticized, moreover, again and again and by anyone – just as in the natural sciences. Theological arguments might be said to be stronger and weaker as accounts of a community’s reflected modeling of itself to itself and to that degree deserving of corresponding acknowledgment even from the outside. But no theology can expect scientific recognition of the correspondence of its claims to some ultimate reality.

Human knowledge, including theological knowledge, forms by means of collecting human experiences, indeed, as many experiences as possible, and communicating, comparing, and organizing them. For Troeltsch, this meant that all theology would have to work a bit more empirically than it had in the past. The position for which Troeltsch was arguing, though innovative with respect to its scientific applications, is consistent with the outline prepared by Schleiermacher who defined even dogmatic theology descriptively as the organized presentation of the prevailing views of a particular community at a particular time (Schleiermacher [1830] 2011, §97). In keeping with this view, Schleiermacher was among the first to develop the science of Church Statistics – essentially a first experiment in comparative theology of the Christian churches. He observed that the more churches multiply and spread, “the more linguistic and cultural areas” they encompass. Correspondingly, “the more numerous are the different notions and ways of living that theology must take into account” and “the more diverse are the historical data to which it must refer” when doing so (Schleiermacher 2011, §4). In short, the more time, the greater the geographical territory, and the more complex the socio-cultural factors, the more empirical theology has to become. In the pluralistic and globalized world of the twenty-first century, I do not see how, pragmatically speaking, it could be possible to work with any other paradigm: The only available options are descriptions and comparisons or fundamentalisms. Faced with this choice, compar-
ison of the most diverse traditions, communication across them, and, in situations where mutual understanding is necessary, a complete translatability of concepts and symbols between traditions form a most pressing set of theological responsibilities.

3.2 Comparative Theology Presupposes and Practices Some Ethic of Participation

The normative and ethical do not disappear in this descriptive-comparative paradigm; quite to the contrary, they are heightened. Description and comparison entail interpretation, for, as far as we can judge within the horizons of human experience, connections between events do not ‘exist’ in any metaphysically real order but must rather be drawn by a subject or subjects who, moreover, are doing so on the basis of incomplete information. The scientific analysis and presentation of the religious lives of others presents itself as a deeply ethical task in the sense that and on the recognition that both what we say and what we do not say, the ways we choose to engage communities and to (remain) disengage(d), all contribute directly to the formation of the scholarly knowledge gained. This then becomes part of the corpus of scientific literature that exercises more and less (functionally, not metaphysically) normative authority, depending on the extent of its reception. Humanities scholars generally and theologians specifically are embedded and participate, not only in the processes of knowledge production and exchange, but in the contexts and communities about whom and for whom that knowledge is developed.

For work in the humanities, including theology, the inextricable historical embeddedness of all knowledge summons scholars to persistent contextualization, and an openness to new information and perspectives – above all from those with a nearer historical, geographical, and traditional proximity – holds paramount importance.

4 Responsibilities and Methods for a Sociable Theology

Which leads us back to the matter at hand, namely, sociability. As discussed in relating Schleiermacher’s theory of sociability, the limitations of individual human ex-

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3 In this essay, I am focusing on issues of research method, and thus can only mention in passing the issue of the ethics of theological knowledge. But this is a point of fundamental importance, indeed, with specific relevance to the topic of sociability. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s doctoral dissertation Sanctorum Communio remains one of the most important studies of what he called human ‘sociality’ (Sozialität) and the church. See Bonhoeffer ([1930] 1998); Green (1997).
perience, combined with human needs and desires to live as well as possible, compel us to sociable life with others. Flourishing must not be threatened but can be enhanced by meaningful participation in community with diverse others. I want to conclude by reflecting on the implications of a sociable approach to contemporary hermeneutical theology for practical and systematic theological research. Practically speaking, the drive toward meaningful participation in community with others creates certain responsibilities, which in turn can function as vectors for guiding new methodological directions in theological research.

4.1 Responsibility 1 – Transcultural Research as Essential, Not Optional

First, a transcultural and transreligious orientation can no longer be seen as optional but must be recognized as essential to practical- and systematic-theological work going forward. Theological research has a responsibility to seek out and incorporate as many perspectives and experiences as possible, à la Schleiermacher’s interest in a reciprocal exchange of thoughts and feelings. This implies a general warning against the acceptance of “willful epistemologies” (Fishbane 2008, ix) – whether in theology or any intellectual pursuit – and a general openness to the world. This is, on the one hand, a basic observation about human living and knowing that is modelled in the modern scientific method’s principled commitment to accepting nothing on the basis of unquestionable orthodoxies and rather to testing old hypotheses against new experience, exploring the unknown, and re-calibrating old knowledge while developing new. But the vitally important point is a socio-ethical one: As human beings, we think and know only in community with other people, and what we think and know depends on who is present (or not) in the communities we create. Not too long ago, one’s own life and the lives of culturally and religiously distant others held much less significance for one another than they presently do – certainly there was nothing approaching the concrete presence of distant others in daily life that many people experience today, at work, in the neighborhood, and even at home, not to mention virtually. Smaller spheres of interaction correspondingly limited the perspectives on what it means to be human and to live well that individuals and local communities could reasonably incorporate into their own self-understanding vis-à-vis their understanding of the totality of reality. Today, however, people all around the world, from every cultural and religious context, live under conditions of a continuous and simultaneous interconnectedness of economic and social media networks. In this situation, the question of human flourishing has taken on a complexity that is orders of magnitude greater than the same question presented just a few generations ago. It is thus a pressing challenge for theological research today to innovate new methods for and angles on studying the ways in which religious communities process this transcultural and transreligious complexity and incorporate it into the particularity of their communal life.
4.2 Responsibility 2 – Cultivating Meaningful Co-Participations in Research

Second, the transcultural and transreligious focus in theological research must itself be recognized as being just as much about meaningful participation in community life – and thus about economic participation, access to education and inclusion in communication networks – as about culture or religion per se. Seeking out and incorporating the perspectives of others requires striving for their full participation – in this case, participation in theological research – and this presents difficulties on several levels. To the degree that the perspectives of others are absent or limited, constrained, qualified, or marginalized from our theological investigations, we can be sure that we are cultivating our complete orientation toward reality on the basis of the particular, limited imagination of one incomplete perspective – which unavoidably results in error and, more gravely, harm (Robinson 2017, 241). Where participation is missing, there arises a responsibility to ensure the opportunity for its cultivation and to support its formation. But what can this mean for scholarship? What might it look like? One simple implication can be to further incorporate intercultural and interreligious paradigms and methods into the core of theological education curricula, rather than viewing them as elective or areas of specialization. But more radically, it will become increasingly important to foster the incorporation into theological work of the thoughts, feelings, and experiences – the visions of life and experiences of well-being or lack thereof – of communities in disadvantaged and excluded social, cultural or geographical locations in a more material way. Are we to engage in theology as activism? Theology as development? Perhaps. But only if we understand development as freedom. As Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen have argued in outlining their economic philosophy of human capabilities, meaningful participation in community requires that persons and groups have the capabilities necessary for creating and conducting a self-determining life (Nussbaum 2011). In Development as Freedom, Amartya Sen described the same principle as people’s ability “to lead the kind of lives they have reason to value” (Sen 1999, 10). This is similar to what Schleiermacher, in his essay on sociability, called following only those laws which one gives oneself (Schleiermacher 2011, 165). For transcultural and transreligious theological research based in Western contexts this would mean not only including non-Western perspectives in teaching and scholarship but encouraging the articulation of those perspectives through supporting self-determining theological education where the resources, forms and platforms for it are lacking. Thus, a transcultural and transreligious focus in theological research, if it is to support such meaningful participation in community, may require methods for bringing the theological reflection of disadvantaged others to speech.

A primary challenge for theological research in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, it seems to me, has been that the Christian churches and movements around the world who are among the largest, most influential, and fastest growing are also among the least represented in (particularly Western) higher-education con-
texts. Here I have in mind, especially but not only, Pentecostal Christian movements and Christian churches among the world’s poorest, in both “developed” and “developing” contexts. These two groups are in many instances overlapping populations. Encounters between much academic theology and various Pentecostal movements around the world carry significant potential for political, cultural, and theological division (Haustein and Maltese 2014, 15–65), and the meanings and goals of “mutual recognition” in these encounters may seem uncertain in many cases. Nevertheless, a transcultural and transreligious theological paradigm, will need to cultivate these encounters. The self-determining participation of the poor and other socially marginalized persons, on the other hand, presents different, especially administrative-logistical complications for higher-education contexts. Academic and scholarly recognition of study programs and degrees or scientific products (publications and research projects, for instance) requires a fund of opportunities, resources, and capabilities often far exceeding what those living in poorer and developing locations have reliably available to them. Nevertheless, both Pentecostal traditions and the world’s poorest Christians have in common that they are communities rich with theological reflection.

5 Concluding Methodological Proposal – Observant Participation and Co-writing Living Theologies

The challenge of incorporating these voices into theological research is in fact two-fold, namely, a challenge of bringing to voice those currently without a presence in global theological conversations and a challenge of discerning appropriate responses of theologies in global conversations to one another. First, regarding the poor and those lacking the capabilities needed for meaningful participation, there is the challenge that – to borrow terminology from another practical-theological context – theological reflection in contexts lacking the infrastructure needed for meaningful participation in global conversations often takes form as a “theology through living human documents” (Nouwen 1968) rather than through the media of publications and institutions more familiar to Western academic theology.⁴ That is, these theologies do exist, but in order to participate meaningfully in global conversations that concern them, they need to be written. The writing of them could be seen as a promising frontier in theological research. In part, this can be encouraged by supporting local theological education that is oriented toward the specific historical, material, and cultural situation of local contexts. But it would also be appropriate to employ

⁴ The term “living human documents” refers back to the pioneering work in “empirical theology” (Nouwen 1968, 60) of Anton T. Boisen, a founding figure in the Clinical Pastoral Education movement of the latter twentieth century. More recently, Sarah Coakley has taken up the concept in calling for a systematic theology that is more pastoral (Coakley 2017).
empirical and ethnographic methods and share them in the life of poor and disadvantaged Christian communities in a kind of reverse coding of fieldwork as traditionally understood in the humanities and social sciences.

Namely, rather than ‘participant observation’ where an anthropologist or scholar of religion seeks to observe while influencing the context as little as possible, theologians can engage in ‘observant participation’. Here the mode is not only one of observation in the sense of watching but in the sense of recognizing, honoring, and respecting a particular community’s experience of the world, vision of ultimate reality, and how the latter organizes its confrontation with the former. In the course of shared life, such a theologian, joining as an outside collaborator, does not seek to bracket-off his or her particularity and isolate the “pure community”. Rather, both recognize that no communal or individual Urbild exists, but both have formed and continue to form in and through life in a shared world. Theological terms, symbols, practices, and beliefs shared by virtue of a common, broadly Christian identity are to be discussed, as well as the various ways each would understand their relevance to the community’s particular political and cultural situation. Nevertheless, the emphasis should remain on capacity-creation for the expression of the self-understanding of that particular community or group as a Christian group in and for its specific situation. Some may worry that this approach would push beyond the bounds of best practices in Religious Studies; this is a reasonable question to debate. But such a practice works in a mode in which self-aware theological research can feel right at home. The resulting theology would not be one that is to be seen as normative or valid for any other than that particular community or group, but it can support meaningful participation in global discourses that have direct and significant impact on their communal life.

In short, more first-order theologies need to be written, and this can be done in part through various modes of supporting, amplifying and partnering with local voices. These theologies can then be set alongside one another, in ways that preserve and reflect all of the socio-political particularity of each respective instance. Such comparative work might make clearer the function of theology in and for the communities in which reflected, intentional religious communications are circulating and, in this way, contribute to scientific understanding of religious self-understandings in the contemporary world. Practically, this would require transcultural, “trans-traditional” (that is, both ecumenical and interreligious) comparative research based, in turn, on extensive embedded observant theological participation of the kind described above. Affirmation is not a requirement of mutuality, but understanding is, and mutual, meaningful participation in one another’s community lives and in global discussions – in a word, sociability or meaningful participation in community – is critical and indispensable for transcultural, transreligious research on theology and religion in the contemporary world.
Bibliography


