
Translation, Description, and the Value of Ethnography: A Response to Lindy Backues

Philip Fountain

Responding to Lindy Backues' review of *The Service of Faith*, Fountain discusses the value and service of ethnographic analyses of Christian development. Rather than being preoccupied with fixing Mennonite deficiencies, he invites a consideration of ethnography as a mirror that can facilitate new self-understandings and as an act of meditation on a world infused with grace.

Unexpected Translations

Lindy Backues' review of *The Service of Faith* correctly notes how important concepts and practices of translation are to my argument. Through an in-depth analysis of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), the book argues that all development, humanitarian, and advocacy projects must be translated across vast cultural gaps. This process of translation involves creative transformations as elements are reworked and repurposed in their new contexts. These reconfigurations are not determined exclusively by NGO fieldworkers (nor Executive Directors), but rather their projects necessarily come into complex negotiation with diverse other actors who bring with them differing motivations, imaginations, theologies, moralities, and ambitions. Translation is, therefore, often unexpected and surprising.

As I read Backues' review, I was reminded that the same indeterminability of translation applies also to scholarship. I am delighted that Backues saw value in the book and found it productive for reflecting on important issues at stake in Christian development. I was also often surprised, and occasionally frustrated, with what I saw as misinterpretations of my argument. But translation always exceeds our control, which is part of what makes it so generative. Once a book (or a development project) is "out there" in the world, the author no longer has control over its meaning and effects. Such interpretive cascading and excess are inherent to scholarly work. And, to a very large extent, we should probably just thank God that this is so. Nevertheless, there are a number of things I want to

communicate in response to Backues' review; not with any intent to determine the book's meaning, but rather to continue a conversation about the practices, ethics, and theologies of both Christian development and ethnography.

As is entirely natural, Backues reads *The Service of Faith* in light of his own experiences and scholarship. With a background in community development work in Indonesia, as a professor who researches and teaches about development at Christian colleges, and as an ordained minister in a Mennonite conference, Backues brings a wealth of experience and knowledge to his reading of the book. It is a gift to be read by thoughtful interlocutors, and I am grateful for the chance to reflect on my book through Backues' eyes.

Description/Normativity

Backues suggests that focal images provide a theological orientation for Christian development workers, and he commends neighborliness and translation-as-incarnation as two focal images that can furnish Christian development work with a deeper, more robust, and more effective theological framework. Backues sees these concepts as an improvement on the Mennonite theologies I describe in the book. In so doing, he takes my descriptive project—I sought to explore how MCCers carried out their relief, development, and peacebuilding work in Indonesia—and presents a normative argument about what should be.

This normative approach was one of the things I self-consciously sought to avoid. Part of the challenge with researching development is the almost compulsive

desire among scholars and practitioners to perceive analysis as only a means to the end of fixing things. In contrast, I wanted to situate MCC, and by extension Christian development, as a culture (for want of a better word) that is distinctive, interesting, and worthy of attention. Deficiencies in need of improvement are not the only way we can seek to understand development ideas and practices. Against technocratic developmentalist inclinations and prominent theological ambitions to evaluate and advise, I sought, as an anthropologist and an ethnographer, to provide a detailed and textured description.

Guesthood and Theological Disarticulation

My analysis of MCC included discussion of ideas and practices of guesthood and theological disarticulation. (It is important to note that these were discussed alongside a range of other MCC matters including canned meat, disaster relief, peacebuilding, education initiatives, evangelism, corporeality, whiteness, global Anabaptism, interreligious encounters, and Indonesia's tumultuous political history.) Backues sees both as problems that need correction. This was not my view. I saw both as fascinating, indeed remarkable, attempts to address the fraught tensions that permeate Christian, and more specifically Mennonite, development programs.

In their desire to present a peaceful alternative to North American, and particularly US, militaristic power and wealth, North American MCC workers sought to behave as good guests in Indonesia, treading softly and gently in a foreign land. This approach was based on a theology of relationality. The goal of behaving as good guests had unanticipated effects and created new tensions; but it also made MCC into an exceptionally generous and sought-after partner for Indonesian organizations, many of whom properly understood that MCC was not simply going to bulldoze their agendas over Indonesian voices.

Backues wants Mennonites to ditch guesthood and embrace instead the theology of being good neighbors. I suspect that many MCC workers would find the idea of neighborliness as conducive to the kind of work they seek to enact. It would not likely be an unfamiliar way of framing their work. Nevertheless, I do not share Backues' confidence that a change in theological framework is necessarily better, or more authentically Christian (however that is imagined). Neighbors can be wonderful people, but they can also be exceptionally annoying busybodies and meddlers who gossip wildly and viciously and who belittle others in vain attempts at petty self-aggrandizement. The idea of neighboring is not somehow exempt from being deployed in very different ways. Nor is it without its own unexpected and awkward reinterpretations.

Backues also finds problems in Mennonite disarticulations of their theology of service, and he wants MCC to be more explicit in stating their theological identity. In *The Service of Faith*, however, instead of seeking to correct Mennonite theologies, I sought to understand why a clear and precise theological articulation was seen, across many decades and by many different leaders, as unhelpful and disadvantageous. In the book I therefore turn theology—or, more precisely, theological articulation—into an ethnographic object. Clarity, I suggest, is helpful only in some circumstances and not others. In MCC's case, the organization already had a clearly defined, but theologically very diverse, constituency. Attempts to provide theological clarity run the risk of offending at least some supporters. Backues leaves out what I think is the most important component of my argument here: this theological disarticulation was not a failure, but rather a communicative success. Of course, disarticulations also have their unforeseen effects.

The Service of Ethnography

I think I appreciate why Backues is interested in providing solutions to the tensions I identify. The tensions rendered explicit in my descriptions can be seen as problems that should be resolved. I suspect that being imbedded in the American Mennonite world would make these tensions even more palpable. But *The Service of Faith* will be of very little service if all readers come to see themselves as playing the role of expert advisers who need to provide solutions to MCC's problems. I see ethnography as valuable because it provides a mirror in which we can learn to reflect on ourselves in new ways. What I really would love readers to do, and especially readers who are part of development organizations (whether Christian or otherwise), is to be inspired and challenged to reflect on their own work, and to begin to see with fresh eyes the unforeseen effects and tensions that are created in the wake of their own, very different, moral projects.

Such mirroring is not the only value of ethnographic description. In the conclusion to my book, I quote Aby Warburg's famous dictum: "the dear God dwells in the details." For me, this points to a vision of divine presence that infuses the everyday minutiae of life with beauty, friendship, and delight. Many of the quotidian tensions, ambiguities, paradoxes, and unforeseen consequences I identify and analyze in *The Service of Faith* are not, in my final analysis, so much problems to be solved as they are holiness to be beheld. Perhaps, in the midst of the undeniable messiness of life-as-usual, readers might also occasionally catch a glimpse of the sacredness of being in a world infused by grace. Of course, such a possibility

is not mine to determine, embroiled as I am in cascading chains of cultural translation.

Philip Fountain is the author of *The Service of Faith: An Ethnography of Mennonites and Development* (2025). He completed his PhD in Anthropology at the Australian National University in 2011. He was previously a research fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. He is an Associate Professor and also Program Director of the Study of Religion at Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

Author email: philip.fountain@vuw.ac.nz
