

A working theology: an evaluation of the popular beliefs of Roman Catholic Filipino seafarers

Graeme Smith, Nelson Turgo, Wendy Cadge, Sophie Gilliat-Ray & Helen Sampson

To cite this article: Graeme Smith, Nelson Turgo, Wendy Cadge, Sophie Gilliat-Ray & Helen Sampson (2021): A working theology: an evaluation of the popular beliefs of Roman Catholic Filipino seafarers, *Practical Theology*, DOI: [10.1080/1756073X.2021.1951945](https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2021.1951945)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2021.1951945>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 25 Jul 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

A working theology: an evaluation of the popular beliefs of Roman Catholic Filipino seafarers

Graeme Smith ^a, Nelson Turgo ^b, Wendy Cadge ^c, Sophie Gilliat-Ray ^d and Helen Sampson ^b

^aUniversity of Chichester, Chichester, UK; ^bSeafarers International Research Centre, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Wales, UK; ^cBrandeis University, Waltham, MA, USA; ^dCentre for the Study of Islam in the UK, School of History, Archaeology and Religion, Cardiff University, Wales, UK

ABSTRACT

The article explores in detail the popular theological beliefs of Roman Catholic Filipino seafarers. It argues that they organise their beliefs and practices to ensure they enjoy God's protection in their dangerous work place. The keeping of religious artefacts, the practice of rituals such as signing the sign of the cross before work shifts, visiting important churches before voyages and asking priests to say mass after accidents or tragic events are all explained as means by which to guarantee God's protection. The question is then asked whether these beliefs and practices might be called a theology. It is argued that what makes them a theology is not any critical or evaluative reflective task but instead the capacity of the theologian describing the beliefs and practices as theology to convince others that the categories utilised can and should be called theology.

KEYWORDS

Popular theology; seafaring; popular religion; Filipino Roman Catholicism

Introduction

The idea of a 'Working Theology' deliberately contains a double meaning. On the one hand, it captures the idea that the seafarers' theology being described and evaluated here is contextual, that is, it emerges from the working environment of life on board large container ships. On the other hand, it recognises that the theology is functional, it works for, in a sense it provides a service for, the seafarers. The purpose of this article is to describe the working theology of Filipino seafarers, to map out its main features, and then to offer an evaluation of it under the rubrics of practical theology. At the heart of the theology is a belief that God acts as the seafarers' protector. When seafarers are asked to explain a variety of religious practices, ranging from keeping religious artefacts in their cabins to requesting priests say mass on board ship after an accident or tragedy, then the main reason given is that it ensures God's ongoing protection. The ship is a dangerous place in which the useful function performed by God is to be a guarantor of safety. This working theology is in part parasitic upon the Roman Catholic faith

CONTACT Graeme Smith  g.smith@chi.ac.uk

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

practiced by the seafarers, and their families, at home in the Philippines. However it will also become apparent that fundamental aspects of the theology are constructed by the seafarers themselves, so at times it appears extremely heterodox, at least to Western academic eyes. Some traditional Roman Catholic practices and beliefs are neglected whilst other more non-traditional beliefs, especially in relation to indigenous religion, are held alongside orthodox beliefs without seeming to cause any sense of incoherence or dissonance. The first and main part of the article will describe the working theology of the seafarers, predominantly in their own words. The second part of the article will offer an evaluation of this working theology, asking whether it can be called theology and then whether it is a good theology. It will be argued that the problem with practical theological reflection is that it brings the theology of the seafarers into contact with a formal and normative tradition that comes from 'elsewhere', namely the priorities of the Church or Western academy. The discussion will identify difficulties with approaches that seek to evaluate critically the seafarers' theology. Instead, what will be suggested at the end of the article is that what makes the beliefs and practices of the seafarers a theology, and a good theology, depends on the capacity of the researcher to identify the theology that is already contained within the beliefs and practices of the group being researched. So the theology of the seafarers is constructed by others based on the material the seafarers already possess. Such an approach avoids bringing in new and different, even alien, theological norms and categories, even when these are developed for the good of the seafarers.

Methodology

The data presented below was collected as part of a larger ESRC funded project entitled, 'Religion in Multi-Ethnic Contexts: A Multidisciplinary Case Study of Global Seafaring'. The project was concerned with two major questions: (i) how do seafarers of different religious affiliations manage their life together onboard ship?; and (ii) how is the work of port chaplains appreciated by seafarers? As part of the research, a team member spent a total of six weeks onboard two ships interviewing all the crew members; 20 personnel on ship 1 (S1) and 31 personnel on ship 2 (S2). Of these 51 seafarers by far the largest group, 34, were Filipinos who identified as Roman Catholics. It is this group whose responses are being analysed and evaluated here. In addition to addressing the questions above the seafarers were encouraged to say something about their religious beliefs. All the seafarers were male, they were a cross-section of ages, and represented a range of ranks and jobs on board ship. A majority were college educated and required to attend regular ongoing training between ship bound contracts. These variables did not appear to impact on the answers to questions being discussed. The team member who undertook the interviews on board ship was also male and Filipino, which meant the interviews could be conducted in Filipino. The interviews were semi-structured, lasting varying lengths depending on the responses of the seafarers. Alongside the interviews, observation by the researcher led to verbatim quotes from seafarers being recorded in the researcher's fieldnotes. The policies and procedures of Cardiff University's Ethics Committee were followed for the whole project. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analysed and thematically coded using Nvivo 12. Codes were developed by the research team after reading the transcripts. It is interesting to note that although the researcher had no stated

formal religious affiliation he was treated as a pseudo religious figure once the nature of his interest was known. This may have led to the seafarers being willing to share with him their religious beliefs.

God as protector

All the seafarers reported that life on board ship was hard. There were two main reasons given for the hardship: loneliness; and the dangerous nature of the work. Seafarers spend around nine months at sea with only intermittent contact with family. It is well established that seafarers experience loneliness as a result of missing family events ranging from Christmas celebrations, family birthdays to the illness and even funerals of loved ones. Alongside this, despite recent improvements, the nature of seafaring work is physically gruelling and often dangerous. Accidents are not unusual and can have severe consequences, not least because medical facilities on board ship are limited. These twin features of loneliness and a dangerous working environment contribute to the context in which the seafarers constructed their theology. In particular the theology of God as protector was a response to the physical dangers of working on board ship.

All the seafarers in our category assumed that God existed. However a number of seafarers described themselves as 'not very religious' despite seeming to engage in a number of Church related activities. For example, and this is not as atypical as it may at first seem, a S2 crew member reported that he was 'not really a religious person, like going to the church every Sunday, that kind of thing' (S2, Third Mate [3M], 4). This was something of a surprising revelation given it was offered in the midst of a story explaining why he had a tattoo of a rosary on his right hand. Further the reason for the tattoo was to remind himself of the advice he had received from a 'Born Again' Christian seafarer when he had been having a difficult time from a captain; namely, 'to pray everyday and remember that trials are part of the Christian life' (S2, 3M, 5) He goes on, 'I got this tattoo as a reminder that God will always be with me in my life. So in a way, this tattoo is my weapon, and my show of promise to God that I will never be put down by anyone' (S2, 3M, 5). Later in the interview the self-reporting non-religious seafarer talked about his religious activities which included going 'to church regularly, not every Sunday but at least once a week'; not eating meat in Holy Week, staying at home and joining the procession on Easter Sunday; giving 'alms whenever I attend mass or go to church'. This seafarer qualified his own status as a Christian by saying that, unlike his mother, he did not give money when the church needed extra funds. What this example illustrates is that whether one of the seafarers interviewed described himself as religious or not was independent of the practices and beliefs they then went on to discuss. Almost all went to church frequently when back in the Philippines, prayed fairly regularly, at least once a day, signed themselves with the sign of the cross at key moments in the day, had religious artefacts on their person or in their cabin, and were aware of Holy Week observances which they kept if they were being marked on board ship. We can speculate that some seafarers had a conception of a 'properly religious person' which acted as a high bar with which they compared themselves. This meant, that despite their religious practices, they would still describe themselves as 'not religious'. But this self-descriptor is not significant from our analytical perspective.

The God whom the seafarers believe in is a God who acts as their protector. One straightforward illustration of the theology comes from a crew member on ship 1. When asked whether he has any religious artefacts he answered that he has a prayer written in Latin which he keeps in his wallet and also a rosary which he has with him when he is on duty on the bridge and which then goes by his bedside in his cabin (S1, Able Seaman 1 [AB1], 6-7). When asked why he had these artefacts he answered, 'Definitely to be safe always'. When asked to elaborate he stated that, 'I always bring something with me, for my safety' (S1, AB1, 7). Asked whether he would not be safe without them his answer is a little more qualified but essentially the same, 'I think I would be safe also but I would be much better off when I am carrying one with me' (S1 AB1, 7). A second crew member from ship 1 made very similar points. He reported that he would occasionally say the rosary, 'Once in a while, sir, I pray the rosary because I have a rosary in my cabin, and also a guide book on how to pray the rosary' (S1, Able Seaman 2, [AB2], 3). He also has a 'pocket size picture of the Virgin Mary' and a 'miniature saint, santo niño' which he keeps in his cabin. Further he signs himself with the sign of the cross before work and also touches his rosary, which he keeps in his locker, before work (S1, AB2, 4-5). When asked why he does this he replied, 'I do it so that I would be protected everyday because our work is dangerous. I feel that I get protection from harm' (S1, AB2, 5). A third illustration of the interaction of religious practices and beliefs about God as protector comes from one of the officers on ship 1. The officer is an active Christian and in the first part of the interview described a number of Church practices he undertakes in the Philippines. When asked about practices on board ship he stated that he prays and in the prayers he gives 'thanks to God for keeping me safe' (S1, Chief Mate [ChM], 6). The officer also reported that he has a Bible, a rosary and a 'handkerchief from Quiapo' with an image of the 'Nazareno' on it, and also a cloth with Psalm 91 on it which is 'posted on the wall' all in his cabin (S1, ChM, 7). When asked to account for these artefacts he makes an interesting connection between a sense of the presence of God and a feeling that God will act as protector, a connection missing in other accounts. He said, 'You are free from harm'; 'It feels like you are being looked after. He is looking after you' (S1, ChM, 8). Then when asked whether this is about being in the presence of God the officer replies,

... there are times when I suddenly feel, out of nowhere, being afraid of something then I will invoke the presence of God. Lord, why do I feel this way? It's like I am talking to Him, asking Him to protect me, to keep me from harm. When that happens and I do that, I feel calm envelops me. (S1, ChM, 8-9)

The officer has made a connection between the sense of God's presence and the notion of God as protector.

The theology of God as protector is most commonly expressed in response to the question of why religious practices are undertaken and religious artefacts are kept. However there are a variety of further interesting expressions of the theology. One reasonably common belief is in relation to Good Friday and the idea that people are more likely to come to harm on that day, and take longer to heal if they are injured. This is illustrated by a story told by a crew member on ship 2. He reports how a ship he was on was in dry dock and so there was a plan to go into the local town. However it was Good Friday and, 'one of the crew asked us why we were going out when it was Good

Friday. He said it is not the best of times because God was dead and we would not be looked after well. So we were prone to accident' (S2, Messman 2, 6). The crew agreed and so did not go into town but instead watched films. Another illustration is the practice of visiting significant churches either before or after a period on board ship. The visit can be to ask for specific help, say before a medical or academic examination, it can be to ensure protection during the trip or it can be to give thanks for a safe return. One popular place to visit is the Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene located in the Quiapo district of Manila and home to a famous statue of the 'Black Nazarene', a dark statue of Jesus of Nazareth which is said to have miraculous powers. A senior crew member on ship 1 recounted how he became involved in the practice of visiting the Quiapo church after every voyage. 'Before I was able to board my first ship, I would usually pass by Quiapo church on my way to the office. So I would come in there and pray. I made a promise that if I passed my medical examination and I would be able to sail, after every contract, I would pay homage to the Nazareno. And I made it as you know. So after every contract, when I am back home, I go to Quiapo church' (S1, Chief Cook, 3). Likewise the officer on ship 1, who was articulate about his sense of the presence of God, engages in a similar practice. He also visits the church at Quiapo, going before and after voyages, and making use of the candles on sale there. He said, 'before I leave for the ship. And when I sign off, I also give thanks. Do you remember the vari-coloured candles in Quiapo? They are sold outside the church. They are for all kinds of petition to God, giving thanks and prayer requests. That's what I do. I go there right after arriving in Manila and before going back to the ship' (S1, ChM, 3). When pressed the officer did reveal that he was not always as faithful in his commitment to visiting the church as he first suggested. But if he forgets, or delays to go shopping beforehand, then he is reminded; 'It seems like your archangel reminding you that you've not given thanks to God yet' (S1, ChM, 4). Quiapo is not the only church that is visited for this purpose. A crew member from ship 1 visits the Minor Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary at Manaoag before each voyage to fulfil a vow (S1, Fitter [Fit], 2). This he does because of an experience of another seafarer. The other seafarer told our crew member that on one occasion he had been working on a tanker when there was a serious fire in the engine room. This seafarer was in the habit of visiting Manaoag. The seafarer reported that as the fire raged, 'he felt like there was a blanket that enveloped him' (S1, Fit, 3). The seafarer survived the fire and inspired the ship 1 crew member to make 'a similar vow to visit Manaoag before boarding my ship' (S1, Fit, 3). Asked to explain his thinking further the officer said,

Yes, I believe that religious vows are of great help to ward off harm. It depends on one's faith. No one will force you to believe in those things. You have the freedom to decide for yourself. That's what I believe in. And you know what, it is really of great help because by the mercy of God, in many years of sailing, I have never encountered a single major accident and hopefully I would never have. You know, we never know. Accidents happen. (S1, Fit, 3)

This quotation illustrates a number of points that are implicit in the theology we are describing. The idea that God acts as protector is clear. In addition there is the sense that this seafarer feels entitled to construct his own theology, his priority being to find what works as opposed to learning the orthodox teachings of the Church. The validity of the theology is demonstrated by the 'proof' that it keeps him safe, demonstrated by

the fact that he has not had an accident, although he is quick to avoid any overconfidence or perhaps any testing of the benevolence of God.

The theology of God as protector is further demonstrated by the desire of seafarers to utilise the Church to ward off the after effects of accidents or tragedies. If there has been a serious problem, or if the ship is new, then seafarers like to invite a priest on board to say mass. Whether this happens will depend on the ship's captain and sometimes seafarers have to wait for the right captain before the mass can be said. A crew member from ship 2 recounts an especially dramatic story, from a ship he previously sailed on, to illustrate the theology. A captain that he had served under, and who was well-liked and respected by the crew, was a diabetic and ran out of medicine whilst on board because the ship had been delayed by bad weather. The captain fell seriously ill and collapsed so he was air lifted to hospital however he later died. At first the crew were told he was recovering however the new captain then passed on the news that he had died. This produced a 'collective grief' amongst the crew. (S2, Fourth Engineer, [4th Eng.], 5). It also produced a new fearfulness. The crew member reported that the crew were alarmed, 'we felt scared of going around on board at night'. He even asked a fellow seafarer to accompany him when he was on duty and had to visit the engine room to undertake routine checks (S2, 4th Eng., 5). Overall there was a feeling of being 'drained' amongst the crew, there was none of the usual drinking and a 'subdued atmosphere on board'. The atmosphere only changed when, at the next port, a priest came on board and 'went around the accommodation quarters, the bridge and the engine room and bless(ed) them all with holy water. Then he also blessed all the cabins. Then we had a mass in the lounge' (S2, 4th Eng. 5). The impact of these ceremonies was to return the ship to normal. The 'lounge became lively again and we had our first "beer fest" night after many nights of abstaining'. Further the seafarer lost his fear of going to the engine room at night because, as he said, 'it was already blessed by a priest'. Other examples are less dramatic but tend to follow the same pattern, crew members seeking a priest to say mass after an accident or problem. In some instances there does not need to be a specific reason, a seafarer on ship 1 reported that there was a discussion and then 'we just agreed amongst ourselves that a priest was needed to bless the ship' (S1, First Mate [1M], 10).

The final examples of the theology of God as protector are perhaps the most expected. If there is some sort of frightening emergency, such as bad weather, engine failure or fires, or attacks by pirates, then seafarers will pray to God. For example, a seafarer on ship 2 recounts the story of how during bad weather a wave smashed the anchor against the side of the ship creating a hole in the bow which flooded the pump room (S2, Second Mate [M2], 8). Any crew not in the engine room monitoring the engines were on the bridge in life jackets prepared to abandon ship, despite being in the 'middle of the ocean'. Asked about his faith at this moment the seafarer replied that, 'That was the time when I felt that I really needed God in my life (laughs). There was no time that I did not ask for God's intervention' (S2, M2, 8). Like so many others, this seafarer also reported that 'I always pray to God that our trips are always safe' (S2, M2, 8). Any attack by pirates is extremely frightening, although fortunately relatively rare in the accounts of the seafarers interviewed. In such circumstances, seafarers turn to God for help as a seafarer on ship 1 illustrates. He describes the intense fear, 'I thought it was the end of us all. My feet were shaking in fear. I was telling everyone we will all die

here!' (S2, M2, 8). He was not alone in his fearfulness, as he reports, 'My workmates were all very scared, you could see it in their faces. Others were on the brink of crying. We were all very quiet' (S2, M2, 8). Asked if this was a point when he asked for God's help the seafarer was emphatic, 'Yes, that time I badly needed God to help us', adding that, 'When you are in extreme danger you have no option but to call upon God for help'. There is no suggestion here that calling upon God in moments of extreme danger is unique to seafarers, merely a common religious trait that they share with a good number of people.

The working theology that we have identified is one that functions to protect the seafarers. Prayers, religious acts and religious artefacts are believed to help ensure the personal safety of the seafarers in their dangerous working conditions. Churches are visited before and after voyages, and masses and blessing requested if there has been an accident or tragic incidence onboard ship. Finally, seafarers pray to God in emergencies. The question to which we now turn is how to evaluate the working theology of the seafarers.

Evaluating working theology

There are two evaluative questions which emerge as a result of identifying the working theology of the seafarers; namely in what sense is this working theology properly described as a theology, and then, is this an example of a good theology. There are of course other questions which might be discussed, and we shall only have space to discuss our two questions briefly, however it is impossible in the space we have to present the theology of the seafarers in its full richness and also explore these questions in depth.¹ In this section we shall argue that whilst the two questions seem initially to be distinct in fact they merge into a single question, namely how is popular theology evaluated. This provokes issues of academic theological elitism when seeking to evaluate popular theology, such as the theology constructed by the seafarers.

The question of whether what we have identified might be described as theology is raised by the overlap between ideas of ordinary or popular theology and relatively new directions in the sociology of religion. Scholars within the sociology of religion have questioned the dominance of the secularisation thesis leading to a renewed interest in contemporary religion. The focus of their study has been on informal and unaccredited religious beliefs and practices. For example, scholars such as Robert Orsi (2005) and Meredith McGuire (2008) have explored contemporary popular practices and beliefs. This work is similar, although not identical, to Jeff Astley's examination of ordinary theology (2002). McGuire employs the concept of 'lived religion' to conceptualise her focus on 'how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday lives' (2008, 12). Astley defines ordinary theology as 'the theology and theologizing of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind' (2002, 56). Both employ methodologies taken from the social sciences to analyse the content of the beliefs and practices being studied. Both also employ a key distinction in theological agency, that is, whether the theology being produced comes from official or accredited sources in the Church or the academy, or whether it is generated by people without formal academic training. As Astley notes, a variety of other terms have been employed to describe the phenomenon of local, non-specialist, one might say

indigenous, beliefs and practices, including folk religion, popular religion, and common religion *inter al* (2002, 88–95). In one sense it might not be important what terminology we assign to the phenomena being studied, what matters is enhancing our understanding of popular contemporary religious and theological belief and practice. However, theologians, including practical theologians, have tended to resist such a *laissez-faire* attitude and argue that there should be something distinct about the theological enterprise. Theological reflection cannot only be the identification of popular beliefs and practices, some of which look very superstitious. Linda Woodhead, in a chapter discussing Don Cupitt's three 'everyday speech' books, themselves an insightful example of the study of popular theology, notes the problem and the way in which theologians tend to respond (Cupitt 1999a; Cupitt 1999b; Cupitt 2000). She describes the shift Cupitt believed he was introducing between the traditional theological method of doctrinal statements shaped by reference to key texts, especially Scripture, and the common, or everyday, theology caught up in popular idioms (2004, 178–179). Woodhead's question was, if what Cupitt was doing was 'no more than telling us what we already believe by interpreting our language back to us, then it is hard to see how she or he differs from the social scientist' (2004, 179). To be a theologian, Woodhead suggested, Cupitt would need to make a judgement on the truthfulness of the theology in the sort of authoritarian, and potentially elitist, manner that Cupitt hoped he was avoiding (2004, 179). In other words what makes this type of popular theology actually theology, as opposed to social scientific findings or even just superstition, is that within the theological reflection process there is an evaluation which employs a normative standard derived from the Christian tradition. Woodhead's own answer is to argue that the 'subjective turn' in religion means that the final authority for such a normative standard lies with the individual rather than the Church, (2004, 180–183). This avoids the criticism of academic elitism but, as she notes, does concede a lot of territory to the notion of an individualistic culture.

Woodhead's discussion reveals the way in which our two evaluative questions, namely is this a theology and is it a good theology, in fact merge. She is suggesting that for popular religious belief to be considered theological there needs to be some sort of evaluative interaction with the Christian tradition. The point is further illustrated by Astley (2002) and his discussion of whether ordinary theology is good theology. Astley both employs social scientific methodologies to investigate the beliefs of ordinary people and also describes his findings as theology. However, he struggles with whether it is good theology when compared with academic theology, recognising that 'the subject (ordinary theology) will be regarded by many as too superficial, naïve, anthropomorphic, incoherent, confused, over-personal, superstitious, uncritical and varied to warrant our attention' (2002, 125). Astley does not necessarily disagree with these criticisms, his argument is that the major difference between academic theology and ordinary theology is 'only a matter of degree' (2002, 124). He then justifies his interest in ordinary theology in two major ways. First, he suggests that ordinary theology might be less rigorous than academic theology but nonetheless it has some rigour (2002, 125–145). To this he adds what looks like the more important point, that ordinary theology examines the actual and really existing lived experience of ordinary Christians and that knowledge of this experience is needed so that the Church 'may properly exercise its ministry of pastoral care, worship, Christian education, apologetics, evangelism, and indeed every other form of Christian conversation, leadership, concern and relationship (2002, 146). In making this

argument there is an implication that Astley does not believe ordinary theology is actually good, but it needs to be known as a starting point for further educational, pastoral and missionary work.

Astley's argument, like Woodhead's discussion of Cupitt, reveals the problem that if the defining feature of theology is that it is critical from a normative perspective then the accusations of academic elitism seem justified. The point is made in a short essay discussing the emergence of contextual theology from the developing world by the missiologist Werner Ustorf (1995). Ustorf, following the so-called 'Third World theologians', draws a sharp distinction between popular or folk religion and elitist or official religion; a distinction he suggests follows 'institutional, socio-cultural and intellectual lines'. Ustorf argues that,

Often it (popular religion) is understood or misunderstood in terms of a belief system, whereas it is more a way of life. Popular religion disturbs the intellectuals' need for a harmonized or controllable world-view. It is very likely therefore that popular religion does not fit into the categories which the dominant or intellectual class has prepared for it. The religions of so-called ordinary people consist usually of simple expectations in relation to life: that one has [enough] to eat, that the crop is good or employment continues, that the child regains health, that debt will not be intolerable and war does not threaten, that one has people to talk to, that one stays alive and will die peacefully, having a decent burial. The people's discourse is often very careful not to go beyond one's own authority: they do not try to 'explain' or to 'know' or even to define God. But often they would insist that the promises of the tradition, e.g. of the Bible, are verbatim, literally true. (1995, 102–103)

What this means, as Ustorf states, is that the 'character of theology is functional' (1995, 103). Ustorf is confusing for our discussion because he moves freely between the nomenclature of religion and that of theology, however it is clear that neither he, nor the majority world theologians to whom he refers, are thinking as sociologists of religion. Ustorf's notion that theology is functional is both highly applicable to the theology of the seafarers and also reminiscent of the concepts employed by Cameron *et al* when they speak of theology in 'four voices' (2010, 53–56). The theology of the seafarers looks like a combination of that which is 'espoused', that is articulated by a group, and that which is 'operant', i.e. that which is embedded in the practices of a group, with the latter being the dominant voice (2010, 54). Cameron *et al.* share with Astley a sense that the espoused-operant voices should be evaluated and so they advocate a methodology of 'conversation' whereby the four voices are brought into dialogue with each other (2010, 56–58). The evaluation is based on the belief that the conversation will serve a revelatory and truthful purpose for all concerned (2010, 57). Cameron *et al.* are aware of the dangers of academic elitism and so are at pains to construct a practical methodology of conversation which avoids perpetuating the superiority of theological expertise, captured in normative and formal voices, whilst still garnishing its insights (2010, 57). The problem with this, and this is why the issue of academic elitism still lingers, is two-fold. First, the desire for a conversation comes from only one direction, namely those practiced at engaging with normative and formal theologies. In our own example of the Filipino seafarers there is no suggestion from them that they might need to engage in any sort of academic theological study. More significantly, the reason they are talking about their beliefs and practices in the way they do, and at all, is because they have been asked by a researcher. But the transaction is one directional, the seafarers are helping us, as researchers, who

ultimately benefit most from the exchange. Second, and more importantly, there is a category confusion. As Ustorf points out, what is being constructed by ordinary people when they develop popular theologies, is 'more a way of life' than a 'belief system'. By asking questions in the way we do, we, as researchers, convert the seafarers 'way of life' into a theological voice, in our case a working theology of God as protector. If academic theologians were to enter into a conversation with the sort of popular theologies identified by Ustorf, and applicable to the seafarers, on their own terms, then they (we) would need to talk about our lifestyles, our families, our workplaces, politics, leisure activities, as well as our insecurities, fears, hopes, superstitions, and dreams. These are not the subject matter of formal or normative theology, at least explicitly, and it is questionable whether academic theologians, *quâ* theologians, are especially expert in these areas. In other words, it does seem that the choice is between being evaluative, and in some way, however sensitive we are, academically elitist, or being descriptive like the sociologists, or changing the theological subject matter to the personal. Before we discuss the implications of this analysis there is one further point to consider.

It could be argued that what practical theologians offer, based on their theological expertise, is a critique of unjust structures and practices. Such a critique, offered with those who are suffering, avoids elitism by taking the side of the oppressed. Stephen Pattison argues for something like this when he discusses the role of chaplains (Pattison 2015). Pattison argues that the place of theological thinking in public institutions is problematic before suggesting, in the second and more relevant part of the article, some ways of addressing this dilemma (2015, 112). He begins with the argument that chaplains can bring a critical perspective to the institutions in which they work by asking a series of questions which seek to investigate and critique the values and ideologies of the institution as well as proposing better ways forward (2015, 116–117). The source of the critical perspective is the lived religious tradition of the chaplain, a tradition which will provoke one or more of the questions, leading to a dialogue (2015, 118). Pattison is keen to marginalise the heretofore dominant 'rational logo-centricism' of 'orthodox theology'. He does this by exploring a variety of theological images and metaphors which are generated by messy, imperfect and embodied theologians (2015, 120). Once this is done he returns to the question of critical perspective, arguing that a chaplain in an institution can adopt, following Elaine Graham, an 'apologetics of presence' (2015, 126). Pattison then describes the theological perspective he is advocating,

It (the apologetic stance) is rather a standing alongside individuals and institutions to nurture citizenship and human flourishing. In Christian terms, it is seeking the good of the whole city. To be credible, such an apologetic stance must be enacted in practice in solidarity with collaborative attempts to achieve common moral objectives in public, non-religiously dominated places, recognizing and valuing difference, diversity and different voices. It must seek and promote justice for the disenfranchised. It must also help to witness to hope for the godless and God-Forsaken; prophetically speaking truth to power, when power would rather not acknowledge the implications of what it does. (2015, 126)

This sort of critical theological perspective would be one that engenders flourishing and justice for the lonely and physically threatened seafarers. It might mean advocacy of shorter contracts, safer working conditions, greater access to the internet, perhaps even longer stop overs in ports with planned rest. The theological critique is one in which the welfare of the seafarer is prioritised. However, whilst this is admirable and

cannot be gainsaid, there is a difficulty in that it differs so significantly from the content and function of the working theology produced by the seafarers themselves. The seafarers seem to be discussing very different ideas, ideas of God as protector. So whilst the seafarers may well benefit from the welfare approach of the critical perspective outlined by Pattison they equally may not be able to connect it to their own theological thinking. Further it remains a theology that has come to the seafarers from elsewhere, it is alien. When they were asked about God, the seafarers did not talk about a notion of human flourishing. Rather the concern for justice comes from the formal and institutional theologian. It is difficult to argue that they should be concerned with justice and also then that academic theology does not think of itself as superior. This is not to say the seafarers would not raise or agree with the workplace issues a chaplain committed to justice might advocate, but rather that this is not perceived as the theological priority by the seafarers. It is not what they talked about when asked about their faith.

Conclusion

In the first part of the article we described the beliefs and practices of Filipino seafarers. This was undertaken under the rubric of a working theology of God as protector. In the second part of the article we asked two evaluative questions, were the beliefs described actually theology and, if they were, was it a good theology. Discussing these questions with reference to Woodhead and Astley we found they merge as one with the identifying feature of theology being its interaction with the normative Christian tradition. Traditionally this interaction has been evaluative, critical and conducted by those shaped by the values of the Western formal and normative tradition. We have attempted to show how this is the case by discussing Ustorf, Cameron *et al.* and Pattison. The conclusion we are left with is that what the seafarers describe when asked by a researcher can be called theology if a theologian can describe and categorise it as such in a convincing manner, as was attempted in the first part of the article. In other words the theology lies within the beliefs and practices of the seafarers rather than being brought to their lives by theologians from 'elsewhere'. Whether the theology is convincingly theological is a matter for readers of the constructed theology to decide, based on their appreciation of the categories employed by the theologian constructing the theology. It may not pass an evaluative test employed by theologians committed to a normative Christian tradition, but then, as is illustrated here, that is not its purpose or function. Instead, the seafarers have constructed a theology that works.

Note

1. One alternate line of investigation would be to discuss the role and place of religious artefacts in terms of religious material culture as is done within the sociology of religion and practical theology; see for example Pattison (2007), *Seeing Things: Deepening Relations with Visual Artefacts*, London: SCM Press.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Economic and Social Research Council: [Grant Number (ES/N019423/1)].

ORCID

Graeme Smith  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9925-9199>

Nelson Turgo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5508-7260>

Wendy Cadge  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1713-5449>

Sophie Gilliat-Ray  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8320-6853>

Helen Sampson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5857-9452>

References

- Astley, Jeff. 2002. *Ordinary Theology. Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Cameron, Helen, et al. 2010. *Talking about God in Practice. Theological Action Research and Practical Theology*. London: SCM Press.
- Cupitt, Don. 1999a. *The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech*. London: SCM Press.
- Cupitt, Don. 1999b. *The Meaning of it All in Everyday Speech*. London: SCM Press.
- Cupitt, Don. 2000. *Kingdom Come in Everyday Speech*. London: SCM Press.
- McGuire, Meredith. 2008. *Lived Religion. Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford: OUP.
- Orsi, Robert. 2005. *Between Heaven and Hell. The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Pattison, Stephen. 2007. *Seeing Things: Deepening Relations with Visual Artefacts*. London: SCM Press.
- Pattison, Stephen. 2015. "Chaplaincy as Public Theology: A Reflective Exploration." In *Health and Social Care Chaplaincy*, edited by Carey Lindsay B., 110–128. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing.
- Ustorf, Werner. 1995. "'Not Through the Sound of Thunder'. The Quest for God in the Backyard of History." In *Dare We Speak of God in Public?*, edited by Francis Young, 100–114. London: Mowbray.
- Woodhead, Linda. 2004. "Theology: The Trouble Its In." In *New Directions in Philosophical Theology. Essays in Honour of Don Cupitt*, edited by Gavin Hyman, 173–186. London: Routledge.