

Meaning-Making in Everyday Life:

A Response to Mark S. M. Scott's "Theorizing Theodicy"

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Mark S. M. Scott argues that religious studies theory could benefit by shifting analysis of theodicy from the abstract formulations of scholars to the meaning-making efforts of everyday religious people. In keeping with a "lived religion" emphasis on the ability of religious agents to shape their worlds using resources they have at hand, Scott likens everyday "theodicizers" to sailors who navigate stormy existential seas by drawing meaningful links between the story of their lives and the metanarratives and archetypal stories found in their sacred texts, theologies, and traditions.

As someone with an interest in both sociology and religious studies, I have been privileged to work as a research associate on the Templeton-funded project *Spiritual Narratives in Everyday Life* headed by Dr. Nancy Ammerman at Boston University. Among other things, the study's rich empirical data illustrate some of the ways in which persons (Americans, in this case) do or do not engage in meaning-making projects in the face of life's various challenges. Although it is impossible to deal with everything here, I would like to do three things in this brief response: 1) affirm the overall direction of Scott's thesis, 2) suggest some ways in which his theoretical understanding of narrative can be refined and expanded, and 3) note some other issues related to theodicy and narrative that beg to be addressed more substantively in the future.

To begin, it is evident from our empirical data that many religious people do indeed narrate their lives in the ways that Scott describes. When people encounter life

crises in which their taken-for-granted and habituated ways of approaching the world no longer work as well as they once did, they are more likely than before to engage in conscious reflection as they define and redefine appropriate ways of thinking and acting. Also, when they give accounts of the tragedies that have befallen them, at least some of our participants draw explicit links to passages of scripture, theological dictums, and other resources of religious tradition.

With that said, the fact that most of the participants in our project belong to various religious *communities* highlights an element that is merely implicit in Scott's theoretical framework. While not all of our participants are highly involved in their communities, there is a strong collective component evident in the construction of their theodicies. In her writing on narrative, sociologist Margaret Somers identifies four dimensions of narrative that are operative in human social life.¹ While Scott has approximated three of them—namely the “ontological narratives” of the individual,² overarching “metanarratives” or “masternarratives,” and the abstract “conceptual narratives” of the scholar—his formulation misses what she calls “public narratives,” institutional and cultural stories that define who members of a community are and how they are to act. Although it is important to speak of macro and micro levels of narrative, it is equally important to recognize and analyze how those stories are culturally constructed and sustained at a meso (i.e. institutional) level. In Scott's analogy, each ship is essentially the intellectual property of a single captain (even if there is a crew on board). In our data, however, we do not find individuals negotiating meaning alone, but

¹ See Somers, M. R. (1994). The narrative constitution of identity: A relational and network approach. *Theory and Society*, 23, 605-649.

² For a description of why these “ontological narratives” might better be termed “autobiographical narratives,” see Ammerman, N. T. (2003). Religious identities and religious institutions. In M. Dillon (Ed.), *Handbook of the sociology of religion* (pp. 207-224). New York: Cambridge University Press.

individuals involved in an ongoing negotiation of meaningful narratives within the context of particular communities. To extend Scott's metaphor, the ships that people sail are not altogether of their own making. Each individual may construct his or her own vessel, but it is the community that provides the raw materials and ship-building instructions.

Additionally, while Scott's analogy of theodicy as navigation is helpful, I would like to stretch it a bit by pointing out that cognitive maintenance performed by the believer in the midst of life's storms sometimes goes beyond "recovering" or "reinforcing" the ship to include a *modification* of its structure. For some believers, conceptual modifications may be fairly minor, which makes it appropriate to talk about the construction of theodicies in terms of the continuity and integrity of their ship. For others, however, the ship that emerges from the storms may now have a reengineered, makeshift frame accompanied by a multitude of oars, sails, and periscopes jutting off in all directions—such that one might ask whether it can even be called the same vessel. When forced to confront the reality of evil and suffering, some persons end up with vastly different worldviews than the ones with which they began their journey.

Let us stretch the metaphor even further. If empirical research is to provide grounding for theory, analysis should be done on the degree to which it does or does not make sense to talk about everyday theodicy as pilots of only one ship. As I have looked at our data, I have been struck in several cases by the varied and sometimes contradictory ways in which our participants narrate their lives. If to conceive of theodicy as navigation is to think in terms of a journey, then it may make more sense to think of individuals as boarding a series of different types of ships as they confront

various conditions on their passage across the stormy seas.³ Of course, some will say that this goes too far. Nevertheless, even if one views people's actions and narratives as more coherent than diffuse, multiplicity must still be reckoned with. Even on a single ship there are various apparatus and instruments designed to accomplish different tasks. Moreover, not only are there often a sizable range of shipbuilding materials and instructions provided by an individual's primary religious community, but since individuals are almost always members of many kinds of communities, they are able to select from many other sets of shipbuilding materials and instructions as well.⁴

As I undertake a fuller and more systematic analysis of the *Spiritual Narratives in Everyday Life* data, I aim to investigate exactly how coherent people's narratives are when they describe their encounters with suffering and evil. What are the public narrative and metanarrative sources from which people draw the various strands of their personal narratives? Or, to return to the metaphor of the ship, which instruments and tools do people use to face the various storms, and from where do they get them?

Additionally, it will be important to examine the kinds of adverse conditions in which Americans feel compelled to engage in the meaning-making project. If people are more likely to undertake such a project when faced with a crisis, what constitutes a storm of great enough magnitude to require explanation? A flooded basement? The loss of employment? A protracted illness? The death of a loved one? If theodicies are culturally constructed, we might expect that what is seen as a common afternoon shower in underdeveloped parts of the globe may be perceived as a torrential downpour in a

³ Scott hints at this when he describes how different types of evil can necessitate different intellectual accommodations.

⁴ For a fuller discussion of the "intersectionality" of narratives across institutional lines, see Ammerman, N. T. (2003). Religious identities and religious institutions. In M. Dillon (Ed.), *Handbook of the sociology of religion* (pp. 207-224). New York: Cambridge University Press.

wealthier place such as America. Or it may be that certain forms of suffering require explanation no matter one's geographical or social location.

Finally, it will be important to assess the underlying assumption of Weber, Berger, and Geertz that humans have a universal need for meaning. As Scott reminds us, everyday people are actively involved in theodicy construction. Yet it remains to be seen exactly how much definition they truly find necessary. Is everyone terrified by the inexplicable? Or are some people able to tolerate, or even embrace, mystery in the face of suffering? In their attempts at formulating theodicy, on how many levels do symbols need to appear? Must they encompass the whole cosmos, or might a much smaller scale suffice? Are there people that need no formulations beyond an intuitive sense that, at bottom, the world is a good place and everything will be all right in the end? These are fundamental questions not only for religious studies, but for sociology as well, and Mark S. M. Scott's suggestion that we consider how meaning-making functions in the lives of everyday people is the best place to begin our search for answers.