



Short Communication

‘Cosmic Loneliness’: An Exploration in Grounded Theory

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Abstract

The aim of grounded theory is to develop theology from the ‘bottom up’. The methodology is essentially that of grounded theory. This involves looking for emergent themes in the data, articulating what might be considered a theological insight and evaluating this in light of the theological tradition. Most qualitative research using grounded theory in practical theology has been exploratory and largely descriptive. Theological reflection is often an afterthought, and not the goal of the research. I will argue for such an application of grounded theory, this is consistent with the aims of this methodology.

Keywords

Older adults; Cosmic loneliness; Faith

Introduction

An emergent theme in this study was the idea of cosmic loneliness. This theme emerged from the interview data and reflects the experience of participants in various ways. I will first look at the grounded theory approach; specifics of the methodology of this study provide a thematic analysis of the data and propose that the experience of cosmic loneliness might be a factor in coming to faith.

From Grounded Theory

Grounded theory has influenced social science research for nearly 50 years and has produced many theoretically innovative studies [1]. This is a powerful methodology that employs strategies to gather rich data, to encourage the “emergence of conceptual categories” with careful analysis to produce explanations and potentially generate theory [2]. The ‘theory making’ potential of grounded theory has a natural application in theological research. The published study using grounded theory was in luck [3]. Over the years grounded theory has employed techniques such as interviewing and theoretical sampling. Data is analysed using code: initial, focused, possibly axial and theoretical coding. The process of theorizing ‘as you go’ is facilitated by memo writing and sorting categories then finally proposing a theory [4]. It is an inherently adaptive process.

What I have called grounded theology developed out of a qualitative study. This was based on 15 interviews. The ‘snowball

technique’ of sampling was used to approach potential subjects. This method of gathering a sample is also known as ‘chain referral’ or ‘purposeful sampling’ which has limitations since it is not randomly selected but is useful to identify people with specific interests. Ethics approval was gained through Charles Sturt University, Canberra, Australia. The interviews lasted about 30 minutes.

The initial goal was to investigate the views associated with theology and aging. This is consistent with grounded theory, which can begin with a general topic and no predetermined research problem. The following 15 people consented to be part of the first study: Bill age 68 Agnostic; Nell, age 72 Agnostic; Sarah, age 62 Agnostic; Anselm age 75 Liberal Protestant; Hannah, age 69 Liberal Protestant; Campbell, age 70 Anglo-Catholic; Annie, age 67 Anglo-Catholic; Rowan age 65 Anglo-Catholic; Jean age 67 Charismatic; Frances age 62 Charismatic; Anthony, age 65 Charismatic; Ruth, age 63 Charismatic; John age 69 Reformed; Elizabeth, age 67 Reformed and Susan, age 66 Pentecostal. In the second study I re-interviewed 12 of the original 15 subjects. The questions explored themes such as the influence of aging, meaning, significant or unusual events, and attitudes to luck. Each person chose a pseudonym to preserve anonymity.

The sample represented a range of perspectives. The classifications were mine, but generally reflect church allegiance if present. There was no attempt to include people of other faiths. The people in the samples were well-educated, financially secure and living in Canberra, the national capital of Australia.

In grounded theory the researcher is encouraged to approach data without preconceptions. However, this is impossible, so it is better to accept the pragmatic principle that an open mind does not mean an empty head. There was no initial literature review, but other views informed about the discussion of results.

The data from the interviews was collected, transcribed, and coded using NVivo 10. This was helpful to identify what might be considered micro-themes. However, I found this less useful than grouping general themes, followed by a ‘match and compare’ analysis of themes, memo writing and idea mapping with large sheets of paper. Themes tended to be large and it was better to visually represent ideas relevant to an individual’s beliefs. The emotional reactions of participants were observed and noted, especially anything surprising or that might need explanation. This helped the final stage of sorting and refining ideas to inform theoretical conclusions. It was only in the last stage, in the discussion stage, was there any comparison with the theological tradition.

The challenge of this method is to be conceptually creative. This is both strength and a weakness of the approach. There is potential to develop new ideas from the ground up, but since it is dependent on finding emergent themes and then conceptual development, like grounded theory, it easily falls short and case can easily become dull or even bad theology.

In this paper I will propose ‘cosmic loneliness’ as a possible factor for belief in God.

Results

According to the adage reality ‘what you stub your toe against’. But people stub their toes against different realities. This was evident

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in the diversity of views in the study. Some considered the 'ultimately' real to be what is available to the senses. For others, what-we-see is more a gateway to something more – to a transcendent realm. This study highlighted this fundamental difference between non-religious and religious people. But the differences do not end there. People with a faith perspective had different ways of seeing God's presence or activity. Believers may emphasise God as ordering reality, speaking directly to the person of faith, being active in spiritual experiences or intervening in the physical domain in miraculous ways. Some combined different ways of seeing God. I will first look at what people said and then consider why the theme of cosmic loneliness might be relevant.

Reality 'by itself'

A number of participants were agnostic. They concluded that there is no convincing evidence that God or any superior beings exist. Reality just is, a tree may be beautiful, but it remains a tree. There is a richness in the 'here and now' of life with relationships and social responsibilities. Bill could see no justification for a specific religious belief, "It's very arbitrary because in one society it's one God, in another society, it's another God." He continued, "I just haven't seen any evidence that there is a God." He reasonably asserted that his rationality mediated his perception of reality. Bill has not had unusual experiences such that might point to God, "Specific events like an 'Ah ha' moment – no. I don't think so. I think, um, it's a more, for me a more thoughtful process. Ultimate reality as impersonal, "Well, nobody decided that I should get a better deal than somebody else."

Sarah has a sense of beauty, "I feel connected to nature... I feel connected to the earth." She has experienced many tragedies, including the death of her sister at age 7, the birth of a disabled son and the suicide of her husband, "I never believed in God. I never had it even though I wished I did. I just think it would have been great comfort a lot of the time." She thought about her son and the meaning of his disability, "K wasn't sent to me, he was just born and he's got a mutation on the 27th chromosome... completely random". For Sarah it was impossible to believe in the face of random suffering. She has never had an unexplained experience, "No", though she added, "I've known people who have had them."

Previously Nell was a committed Christian, responding at a "Billy Graham crusade" but after a few decades her belief system collapsed. There was no bitterness, she remains grateful for the people of faith who have accompanied her on her journey. Previously, she felt a sense of God's purpose in life events and she acknowledged her good fortune in life. While reality is interpersonal, it is not extra-personal in the way that she once believed, "I find the meaning in sensory things, in what I see, what I feel, what I do, and the people I meet." Life is wonderful, "I've always lived life intensely because I've always loved it."

The agnostic position prioritizes rationality in understanding reality. This does not hinder meaningful relationships, adopting responsible values, and living out ethical commitments. But the idea of a 'beyond the senses' transcendence is not attractive. In contrast to believers, agnosticism might be likened to 'paint stripping' any colour of transcendence from the encounter with reality. Though it may be, arguably, to see rightly.

Something unexplained

Some in the study were more broadly liberal. Being rational is good but it does not exclude the unexplained. Anselm reported some

surprising experiences, one associated with the death of his mother (who lived in a distant city), "Yes certainly, I mean who hasn't? Well just take one (that is) fresh in my mind ... I remember the morning that she died we were in bed at home ... I woke up about 5am in the morning which is not unusual, but I was very awake and mum was at the bottom of the bed and she said to me 'I'm going now'." Anselm's mother died at that moment in Sydney while he was in Canberra (200 miles away), "So something like that makes you think." This might be considered as para-normal, perhaps indicating that there is more to reality than can be grasped by rational investigation. Anselm recalled other incidents including, "I was walking across a waterfall in the Blue Mountains ... slipped and I don't know why I didn't fall over the edge. It was almost as if an angel picked me up and put me down safely. A few incidents are like that where I don't understand how I got out of it unscathed." But such experiences are remained unexplained, but not packaged in theological language, except for his escape being likened to the agency of an angel. Anselm's journey has been in the direction of giving up creedal beliefs.

Hannah reflected on her spiritual journey. She wanted to experience what a friend 'had', "She seemed such a happy person and I was not happy so I wanted the born again experience which I eventually had about 11 years later by the time I was in Australia." She expressed her relationship to God, "I use the word God and I really mean the sense of the sacred and there's this sense that there's something there guiding you but I think that the purpose is that you come to love yourself so that you can then give ... this of course is all connected with Jesus and his ministry." Hannah would identify herself as Christian and this provides inspiration for her life. She travelled away from a fundamentalist faith, guided in part by reading Bishop Spong, "now I find that I can be open to a whole lot of ideas and so you find that things will come together." God is not seen as intervening "No, I don't think in terms of God. I would have done originally but now, no. I don't think of God sitting up there engineering stuff." She has felt his loving presence, "Julian of Norwich talks about being enfolded in God's love so I often feel that experience of just lying there and being enfolded in God's love."

The liberal Christian approach values rationality, and tolerates 'not knowing'. This is not contradictory. God is on the edge of awareness and the example of Jesus can provide inspiration for living a good life. There was also a sense of an undefined presence.

God of hidden order

Many in this study believed that a benevolent God orders reality. Elizabeth said, "Because you live your life for Him, to Him, in obedience to Him, to serve Him." It seemed reasonable that "If God knows how many hairs I've got on my head, why would He not be in charge of everything?" She added, "I guess all things are under His control." She has a relationship with God, "Experience and walking with the Lord I guess and knowing Him better." While her life has had a number of challenges, she looked back, "I have had a charmed life if you want to use the word 'charmed'." She reconsidered the word and concluded that grace was a better word.

John aligned with a theological perspective. This includes a divine ordering "eternal life starts when God discovers you and when you are converted ... its eternal life to know God." He saw that becoming a Christian was more about God than himself, "To hear the gospel preached and to respond to the gospel not of my own volition as I ultimately worked out because of the work that the Lord has done." Over the years he had some experiences of being protected, "That's

the thing I found in my 20s. I've seen it. You know, a guy pulled me back before I stepped under a bus in Sydney. I remember that with absolute clarity. Thank you God." There was a sense that God-acts-through-people, but this is not to limit God. There is a divine order "I mean, I think our life and our times are in the Lord's hands."

Anthony had a similar understanding, "God has made the universe as such that a lot of the time you make your own way but there are also random events that are superimposed upon that and really then it is how you respond to those events." The most important thing is to do God's will (and almost knowing God through obedience, to know "his nature"). But he expressed some ambivalence about the thought of being protected, "I don't think so but I suspect at times we are ... Now, whether God directs that at times I'm not sure. Or protects you from it." Anthony recalled experiences related to spiritual healing through "Theophostic prayer ministry" which helped him. He could not recall any unexplained events, "I think I'm a pretty pragmatic type of person."

Elizabeth initially used the word "charmed" and while she preferred "grace", the first word conveys a kind of bestowed magical quality to seeing God's presence. John was clear expressing his belief in a divine order and could give examples of being rescued in unlikely circumstances. While Anthony described himself as "pragmatic" he sought spiritual healing through prayer. I have loosely grouped these participants who have a deep trust in God's hidden order. All would see that there is more to reality than what is obvious and this provides a basis for trusting God.

Sacramental experience of reality

Some articulated a relationship to reality that might be considered transparent to God. Rowan did not recall any dramatic experiences "Well, I've loved the music of the church since an early age, from the age of 7 or 8. I went to the children's choir. We had a new priest come to the parish where I grew up and so there hasn't been a dramatic experience other than what I said before, the Bible commentaries and prayers." Rowan responded to the gospel, which included an aesthetic dimension, "So I understood the implications of it all, it was the only dramatic change but moments of great beauty and joy and whether it's scenery or paintings or worship services." Rowan also had a sense of God ordering things, "Well yes, it must have been wisely ordered."

For John beauty was also important, "How did a youngster of 13 or 14 suddenly get fascinated by the person Jesus Christ? There used to be a beautiful music program of the 100 best tunes which inevitably always had huge helpings of Purcell and Handel as well as the Continental masses and so on and what was all this on about?" Anselm recalled, "Going back a long, long way to childhood. We moved ... to another town further out west ... It wasn't really on the edge of the desert but it was far enough west to get an appreciation of the arid so the thing that really gave meaning was when I discovered the desert." This became sacred, "That desert spirituality, the desert environment, yeah it was pretty spiritual actually." Annie said, "I have a strong personal sense of God." She had this as a child; she was a "child who naturally prayed. One of my very favourite things was sitting in the garden amongst the flowers and having a sense of awe of what was around me, so the natural world has obviously played a big part." This was experienced through people and creation, "Grace is where we either implicitly or explicitly, it can be both together of course as well, are receptive to the presence of God so that God takes our desire for what is good, what is beautiful, what is loving and He is able to guide and empower us in that connecting with the source

of all life." This is not based on any expectation of protection, "we actually had 5 children; we lost two infant sons who were both born live births." She participates in regular worship, the "Eucharist is a very precious form of not just worship, but that opportunity for me to be drawn more deeply into the heart of Christ. And because that is central to that parish I really appreciate that."

The experience of a divine dimension behind reality was expressed by Campbell, "I would connect the Christian story, the resurrection of Christ, the irrepressible power of the resurrected Christ as available to us in the Spirit, that we are not alone and that mysterious absence of his presence and somehow to be discerned in faith as part of our journey". He liked to think about "That Celtic sense of the invisible world is just beyond, that what is visible world is just the edge of a large and invisible world and I think that the nearest sense of getting close to that, a very poor expression of it in some way ... is in a well done Catholic liturgy." He said, "There are a lot of things, the movement of the breeze in the trees, I attend to those things and I see the glimpses of infinity and the glimpses of eternity, the beauty, just little reminders of the ultimate nature of reality that speak of God." He saw providence in "meeting my wife. I prayed to meet her." There is no single path to seeing the sacred. One way is through beauty and this can be understood in sacramental terms, more than ordering, but a breaking through the ordinary and revealing the divine in moments of enhanced experience. For Annie and Campbell reality is richly personal, including of course God and the divine realm, which is appreciated through ordinary and liturgical experience.

God who Speaks

Ruth also saw God providing order, with the "ultimate sense of meaning comes from the sure knowledge that I am a child of God and he loves me and that there is a purpose for my life." This was understood relationally, "My understanding of God is that he is relationship ... Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." She has been receptive to guidance, "This thought came into my mind 'I need to go and see dad'. I thought to me, 'Well that's really stupid; I'll see him in a few hours' time. No, no, I'm not going to.' (she went and averted his possible death), then saying, "God, thank you, you were telling me to do this against all common sense and OK, you really do have a relationship with me, you really do care about me." She belongs to a church that prays for divine healing, "I am struggling at the moment with the concept of healing." This is because she has some continuing health issues.

Susan described an intimate relationship with God, "I've walked with God over the years, and the more I walked with Him the more I've got to know Him. It's like a friendship." She recounted some amazing experiences, "When I was 7 years old ... we lived in Yandina in the hinterland of the Sunshine Coast in Queensland and it was a Sunday afternoon and our house was absolutely destroyed by a cyclone ... It was probably a couple of days later, I would think, my mum said to me 'Come on, we need to pray because daddy can't find the insurance papers.' ... I remember we prayed and before she finished praying this thought came into my mind, it was a picture as clear as anything, a picture of the papers in the pocket of my father's suit coat that he never wore. And I said 'Mum, mum, I know where they are, they're in daddy's suit coat pocket, the one he doesn't wear.' She said, 'Oh no darling, it wouldn't be there.' ... And I said, "Please mum, will you just look?" ... She went and looked and there they were."

There can be something tangible about a religious experience. The charismatic or Pentecostal experience of Baptism in the Spirit

(generally including the spiritual gift of tongues). Frances also had a sense of order, "I guess having his presence with me I think gives an eternal purpose as well and it means that life is just not for me ... the destiny I guess that God has for me." She looked back to a life changing experience, "Yes, I mean I think I was baptised in the Holy Spirit when I was about 19 ... became more vivid I would say, more, I would say that the scriptures became a lot more meaningful to me in terms of reading them, I had a prayer language that made it easier to pray, my faith felt more meaningful." She did not see miracles, "I think I've experienced healings at times but I wouldn't have said that they were necessarily instant so therefore maybe not what I would say was miraculous."

Susan also had a vivid experience of the Holy Spirit, "I grew up in a loving Christian home. Why would you not love God?" She came to a "revelation that God is love and it was probably my first experience of what I would call the Holy Spirit, other than being God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, He was a real person. This Bible that I'd read as a history book and because you needed to, suddenly was the living word."

Quite a few of the people in the study had a sense that God ordered their lives. I have highlighted God communicating to the believer in remarkable ways. This includes the gift of speaking in tongues that the believer can respond with a spiritual language – one considered special and reserved for communication with the divine.

A God of Intervention

A few people in the study made the strong claim that God acted for their welfare. This was not to claim any special 'protection', perhaps more a gracious provision. Jean has seen some answers to prayer, "It does feel a bit random but my husband prays a lot and I see a lot of those things being in response to his prayers." She has had experiences of God protecting her family members, "I think sometimes with our son, especially our son who was for a long time, well for a few years anyway, addicted to heroin, there have been times when he has been saved that I have to sort of think, there has to have been an intervention from God that saved him. I'll give you an example ... He took them (the drugs) ... took the drugs and he was in his car. It must have been on the edge of a park and he OD'd. And a lady walking her dog found him and called an ambulance and he was saved. And I think, 'How many people walk their dogs at 1.00 o'clock in the morning, look into a parked car and see someone and know that they've overdosed and call an ambulance and they get saved. So for me I thought that has to be God."

Campbell said, "I should mention is my experience of healing of cancer because I was diagnosed with inoperable, incurable, highly advanced, life threatening lymphoma. The tumour was the size of an ostrich egg and many others; riddled from my neck to my femur ... I took myself back to our very first Anglican priest who had 30 years in the healing ministry." He continued with medical treatment, but "They can only find scars where the tumours once were, and I have no active condition. It's not unknown to medicine; a spontaneous remission would be the medical term. I know it's just not spontaneous remission, I know that I've been granted a reprieve and I've been given extra time and my chief concern in life is to use it well." Annie was also thankful for the remission of her husband from cancer.

Susan has had many experiences which might be described as miraculous "Twice I needed surgery and God healed me supernaturally." This time she had an operation which was successful, but she was spared post-operative pain, "It's a very painful recovery

normally. I have had no pain at all and I couldn't take the heavy pain killers so I've had no pain, I've been able to do physical exercise." She added, "I've got endless, endless stories of little miracles in my life."

These people identified circumstances in which God was believed to have acted in remarkable ways, which they considered miraculous and not easily explained. And such experiences do not seem uncommon even in a small sample of religious people.

I would note that all the subjects in this study came from a broadly Christian background. Everyone spoke about the existence or otherwise of a personal, omnipotent, theistic God consistent with the Christian tradition. If the people in the study came from other faiths, then this common ground would have been unlikely. There is a 'Grand Canyon' divide between the participants in the study. This can be conceived in different ways but I would like to highlight absence and presence. Absence was clearly articulated by Bill, "Well nobody decided that I should get a better deal than somebody else." Presence was captured by Campbell, "We are not alone." Now to explore this profound difference.

Discussion

It is important in a grounded theology approach to look at the data with curiosity. Can I see something interesting that has the potential to be part of an emergent theory? I thought about Sarah's experience of repeated tragedy with the dilemma of wanting the comfort of believing but ultimately not being able. This might be called 'cosmic loneliness' which she struggles to accept, "I never believed in God. I never had it even though I wished I did. I just think it would have been great comfort a lot of the time." This might be contrasted with Annie who has also suffered tragic losses but remains with a profound experience of the presence of God.

Perhaps this highlights something that can be seen more broadly in the responses of others. Bill, for example, has no obvious difficulty with the absence of God. He has a rational perspective and if anything the traditional idea of God, especially one with influence, would 'mess' with his world-view. Nell after the collapse of her beliefs, retains a richly interpersonal world, but this is not extended to ultimate reality, "I find the meaning in sensory things, in what I see, what I feel, what I do." She had considerable grief after her loss of faith, seeing a spiritual director, "I was very fortunate because for 2 years I just cried." This might be likened to the loss of a comforting figure, or an expression of cosmic loneliness. It is interesting that every person who had some identification with Christianity had a sense of God's presence. Anselm has room for the unexplained in his world-view, including a realm of mystery, but also has a hint of providence in some of his experiences. Hannah had a clear sense of God's relational presence "enfolded in God's love".

In the fullness of faith there was no hint of cosmic loneliness. There was the full assurance that God is a God of influence who is active in a variety of ways from ordering reality to being seen in beauty to speaking to directly intervening in the affairs of people in miraculous ways. Of course some would see such assurance as misplaced and ultimately a form of Freud's 'wish fulfilment' [6], but it does answer a need for an ultimate presence. Why people believe is a complex question that has been explored by Graham Ward [7]. There is certainly a quality of felt presence that is important to belief. This has been explored in the theological tradition from Schleiermacher's "feeling" [8], to Otto's sense of "awe" [9] and what Buber saw as a relationship of me and you [10]. Sarah Coakley's recent thought on the spiritual senses has been highly influential [11]. The negative side

might be understood as cosmic loneliness and I would suggest that it plays a role in belief. While the term cosmic loneliness occurred to me, it is not original. There has been some discussion of this on the internet. There are different meanings in various contexts from counselling sites to the overtly religious with evangelistic appeal. An example of a counselling approach is to list cosmic loneliness along with other types such as interpersonal loneliness, or to associate it with existential loneliness, or in the sense of a "yearning for an ultimate source of life and meaning, or God" [12]. There was a reference to cosmic loneliness in a journal article in a reference to the "cosmic loneliness of modernity" but the overall paper had a more literary focus [13]. It would appear that the term has meaning to various people but remains somewhat undefined.

What cosmic loneliness attempts to describe is of course a felt reality. Perhaps no one has ever expressed this more eloquently than the agnostic Bertrand Russell, That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built [14].

Russell expressed a tolerance of cosmic loneliness, though it was labelled "a firm foundation of unyielding despair". William Pepperell Montague "Atheism leads not to badness, but only to an incurable sadness and loneliness" [15]. It would appear that there is a cost to unbelief, seeing clearly the implications in terms of being alone in the universe, but for some people this is 'payable' in the pursuit of truth.

Grounded Theology

In the thematic analysis of the interviews in this study, there was a sharp divide between the experience of the absence and presence of God. I identified a theme of cosmic loneliness as a possible dynamic in belief. There is not attempt to be reductionist, as it were trying to assert that such a notion explains a need for belief, but simply to make the modest point that it might be one factor. Perhaps being a 'driver' for belief or not. Cosmic loneliness might be a source of discomfort, in my study best articulated by an agnostic who suffered many tragedies and another who lost her faith and grieved. Another agnostic was clear in rejecting any notion that someone might meddle with the laws of science. The religious believers were comforted with a sense of a divine companion in life, at times felt, and expressed as an ongoing relationship. The capacity for divine human relationship was accepted and seen as growing into ever more satisfying and intimate relationship.

There is a potential contribution of grounded theology to practical theology. It is grounded in the experience of people. It is about what matters to them – whether of Christian belief or not. The greatest contribution is that it can generate a creative process, escaping circular discussion and introduce new ideas. This can lead to concepts in an applied theology and possibly to inspire further research. The process of grounded theology has been illustrated in this study with a qualitative study leading to the idea of cosmic loneliness.

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