

## CA☆ FORUM ON THEORY IN ANTHROPOLOGY

# Engaging the Religiously Committed Other: Anthropologists and Theologians in Dialogue

by **Eloise Meneses, Lindy Backues, David Bronkema, Eric Flett, and Benjamin L. Hartley**

Anthropology has two tasks: the scientific task of studying human beings and the instrumental task of promoting human flourishing. To date, the scientific task has been constrained by secularism, and the instrumental task by the philosophy and values of liberalism. These constraints have caused religiously based scholarship to be excluded from anthropology's discourse, to the detriment of both tasks. The call for papers for the 2009 meetings of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) recognized the need to "push the field's epistemological and presentational conventions" in order to reach anthropology's various publics. Religious thought has much to say about the human condition. It can expand the discourse in ways that provide explanatory value as well as moral purpose and hope. We propose an epistemology of witness for dialogue between anthropologists and theologians, and we demonstrate the value added with an example: the problem of violence.

Since its inception, anthropology has been engaged in two main tasks. The first is the scientific task of seeking to understand the full dimensions of the nature and expressions of humankind. The second, based on the first, is the instrumental task of using those understandings to press for processes, projects, and policies that will protect and nourish the best of that nature and its expressions.

It is our contention that the depth of anthropology's perspective on humanity, and therefore the relevance of its instrumental uses, has been constrained by the modernist epistemological assumptions and commitments that have generally governed Western academic discourse. In particular, the commitments to secularism and to liberalism, operating in the background of the discourse, have led to the exclusion of religiously based perspectives as intellectually coequal. That exclusion has resulted in a limiting of the theoretical and practical insights available for the advancement of anthropology's perspective in the contemporary world.

**Eloise Meneses** is Professor of Cultural Anthropology, **Lindy Backues** is Associate Professor of Theology and Economic Development, **David Bronkema** is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Economic Development, **Eric Flett** is Associate Professor of Theology and Chair of the Department of Christian Studies, and **Benjamin L. Hartley** is Professor of Church History at Eastern University (1300 Eagle Road, St. Davids, Pennsylvania 19087, U.S.A. [emeneses@eastern.edu]). This paper was submitted 26 V 11, accepted 9 XI 13, and electronically published 9 I 14.

We the authors are Christian scholars, anthropologists and theologians, who wish to make a contribution to anthropology's current consideration of its own ends. In what follows, we unpack first secularism for the limitations it places on anthropology's scientific task, and then liberalism for the limitations it places on anthropology's instrumental task. We suggest that religiously based perspectives can expand the discourse in ways that provide explanatory value as well as moral purpose and hope, and we proceed to illustrate this point with an example of the value added by addressing the problem of violence. Finally, we conclude that the discipline itself is recognizing the time is right to expand its discourse if it is to fulfill its twin purposes of scientific study and instrumental engagement with its public.

## Secularism and Anthropology's Scientific Task

In terms of its scientific task, anthropology has been a secular undertaking. Charles Taylor (1998) traces the history of secularism, from Christendom's two spheres of the church and the world, through the search for common theological ground during the terrible time of Europe's religious wars, to the eviction of religion from the public arena by its transformation into a private and optional good. Western society has moved from "a condition in which belief was the default option, not just for the naïve but also for those who knew, considered, talked about atheism; to a condition in which for

more and more people unbelieving construals seem at first blush the only plausible ones" (Taylor 2007:12). The result in anthropology is that religion has been taken as an object of study, viewed as an epiphenomenon to be understood by analysis in secular terms.

Secularism rests on the notion that the consensus formerly provided by a common religious tradition will instead be established by rational debate. The appeal to human reason is a kind of faith in humanity that suggests we can understand the world and solve our problems if we but hold in check the particularities of our backgrounds, identities, and experiences. In praxis, if not in theory, it postulates a transcendent perspective, objectivity, from which reality can be correctly perceived.

For anthropologists, this proposition has been plenty problematic due to research results obtained from the field. For anyone reading the text with appropriate self-reflection, Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1976) revealed the hermetically sealed nature of our own thinking, along with its imperviousness to the counter-data. All people, it seems, employ explanations that account for the data from within an epistemological system, making it difficult to determine the exact location of the supposed transcendent vantage point. In fact, as "merchants of astonishment" in the academy (Geertz 1984, 2001:44), anthropologists have relished the use of the data obtained from the field to reflect on the very foundations of their own project. Long before Lyotard and Rorty took up the task, a whole generation of anthropologists—including Boas and his students—were questioning the West's intellectual assumptions, its moral evaluations, and its technological goals. They did so simply by describing the subjective worlds of remote peoples in comprehensible terms. The result was a soul-searching investigation into their own cultures that revealed the arbitrary nature of their own thought. Of course, since the advent of postmodernism, the existence or nonexistence of a transcendent vantage point has been a matter of much ambivalence in the field, with some defending traditional views of science, while others are celebrating the situated character of all knowledge. Still, the reliance on ethnography, that is, on empathetically comprehending the object of study's subjective understanding of the world, has made naive rationalism difficult to defend.

Yet, anthropology is deeply rooted in the Enlightenment, and it has tried to solve the problem of what is and is not reasonable by the division of reality into two parts, natural and supernatural. It has used this division as an operating assumption, relegating all observable phenomena of human life to the former as the object of study, and declaring agnosticism with regard to the latter. This overly simple solution to the matter of religious claims is no longer viable. Asad has deconstructed "the doctrine and practice of secularism" (2003:17) and the abstract category, "religion" (1993), demonstrating both to be products of Western history. Lambek (2012:6) remains committed to anthropology as a secular dis-

cipline but acknowledges that it is "pulled between explanation and interpretation, demystification and appreciation, transcendent reason and immanent experience." Chakrabarty (2000:16) has openly identified with the enchanted world of Hinduism in his treatment of the impact of postcolonial thinking on the social sciences. Coming from less secularized cultures, non-Western scholars are more likely to be religiously committed and must learn the secular idiom in order to gain entrance to the academy; they must sideline significant elements of their thought and experience and write in terms that will be acceptable in the West (Kevin Birth, personal conversation, October 20, 2010).

Steven Smith (2010) suggests that, even in the West, secularism is failing because of the inevitably shallow nature of a discourse that does not permit the declaration of normative commitments, commitments that must be smuggled in to resolve problems that secular principles cannot work out. Ramadan (2005) promotes Islam as a means of reviving ethical discourse in contemporary European politics. And Farr (2008) notes the ill effects of secularism on international diplomacy, as diplomats anxiously avoid potentially fruitful religious discourse on human experience and peacemaking.

At issue is the fear that the elimination of the secular, or rather the reduction of secularism to one doctrine among many, will result in an intellectual free-for-all, without grounding or potential resolution. Those already rooted in secularism may well wonder whether an academic discourse is possible under such a circumstance. In part, this fear is a product of twin myths: "the myth of religious violence" (Cavanaugh 2009), which exaggerates the dangers of religious thought, and "the myth of religious neutrality" (Clouser 2006), which denies the existence of fideistic assumptions in secular theorizing (cf. Milbank 1990). In part, it is simply a natural response to the realization that one's own perspective has been deeply privileged.<sup>1</sup>

In any case, with secularism being deconstructed, its unspoken ontological claims will have to be reexamined, and other possibilities considered (cf. Alberti et al. 2011). We believe that all understanding is achieved by an interpretive process conducted against the background of a narrative, or "framing story" (Smith 2009). In the context of lived communities, these narratives produce plausibility structures rendering the world comprehensible and meaningful. In conversations between scholars with different background narratives, understanding is achieved partly through rational discourse, in which cases must be made with sufficient logical force as to convince others, and partly through pure depiction, or illustration, of the data in narrative context (cf. Hart 2003). Scholars find themselves persuaded, or not, of one another's

1. Historians are carrying on a robust discussion parallel to this one. The journal *History and Theory* has published two issues on reconciling historical methodologies based on empiricism with the religious truth claims of historical actors. See *History and Theory* vols. 45 (December 2006) and 47 (December 2008). Gregory (2006) comes closest to the argument we have put forward here.

propositions through a process of careful listening and consideration—the very same skills used in ethnography. A thick description of our beliefs and operating assumptions for the sake of a transparent and ongoing dialogue with those whose assumptions are different can work toward the end of suggesting how various beliefs illuminate, critique, and expand the subject.

The works of contemporary philosophers such as Habermas and Gadamer are helpful in describing the process. Habermas's (1985) 50-year project was to rescue the notion of rationality by grounding it in the speech community rather than the individual. Gadamer drew on Heidegger to suggest that the so-called "prejudices" or limitations of our perspectives are actually necessary to the productivity of the conversation. "In fact our own prejudice is properly brought into play by being put at risk. Only by being given full play is it able to experience the other's claim to truth. . . . The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naïve assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out" (Gadamer 1989:299). Gadamer was more pessimistic than Habermas about the efficacy of human reason, but he was optimistic that "in the process of understanding, a real fusing of horizons occurs" (Gadamer 1989:307), that is, that participants can come to a new understanding by way of the encounter.

We the authors believe that our dual identities as scholars and as believers give us a valuable vantage point from which to contribute to the current debate over epistemology in anthropology. We are Christians working within a socially engaged and intellectually open theological framework deeply shaped by the Christian story as articulated by the earliest strands of the Christian tradition. Our perspective can be described as orthodox, evangelical, ecumenical, and critical in nature. We believe we have something to offer to anthropology in part because of similarities we see between the current contest over epistemology in science and the last century's contest over biblical faith in the Christian scholarly community (Franks 1998). In fact, the destabilizing hermeneutical process currently being experienced in the social sciences had its nascence in Protestant theological history and discourse beginning with the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher in philosophical hermeneutics (Thiselton 1992). Having come through that development in theology, we believe that real understanding is possible across narratives in the social sciences as well.

### Liberalism and Anthropology's Instrumental Task

In terms of its instrumental task, anthropology has largely embraced the political philosophy of "socially democratic lib-

eralism" (Geertz's term).<sup>2</sup> Anthropologists do not typically share liberalism's construction of the individual and certainly not its defense of capitalism, but they do share its moral values on freedom and equality, and they generally support and promote its projects such as democracy, human rights, and tolerance. The classical promise of liberalism is that, through reason-based negotiation of interests in the public square, a moral order will be constructed in which different cultural enclaves can coexist peaceably. All this makes liberalism seem generous in its treatment of alternate points of view. In practice, however, liberalism's claim to a transcendent perspective and superior set of values has dominated the Western public square since the church held that role, and its hegemony in academic discourse is nearly complete.

Despite his own commitment to the philosophy, Geertz takes his fellow liberals to task for their unwillingness to recognize their position as one among many:

Those who would . . . promote the cause [of socially democratic liberalism] . . . need to recognize its culturally specific origins and its culturally specific character. They need . . . we need . . . most especially to recognize that in attempting to advance it more broadly in the world, we will find ourselves confronting not just blindness and irrationality . . . but competing conceptions of how matters should be arranged and people related to one another, actions judged and society governed, that have a weight and moment, a rationale, of their own; something to be said for them. (2001: 259)

There are, says Geertz (2001:258–260), "a large number of alternative visions of the good, the right, and the indubitable," and liberalism must move "from being an ideological fortress for half the world to being a moral proposal to the whole of it."

In making his proposal to the whole world, Geertz suggests that the value of liberalism is "to maintain what seems to me its deepest and most central commitment: the moral obligation to hope" (2001:260). But, Geertz to the contrary, liberalism has been inadequate to the task. Paul Kahn (2008) identifies liberalism's inability to construct a meaningful legitimation of the West's political practices. Liberalism's overreliance on reason as the final arbiter, along with its rejection of community and tradition in favor of the autonomous individual with free-floating interests, causes it, like secularism, to be overly restrictive of the public discourse. By "privileging the subject's capacity to separate self from context and to reform the self on the basis of deliberative choice" (Kahn 2008: 30), liberalism distances people from the usual sources of meaning, which are religious and cultural contexts. Most sig-

2. Geertz cites Isaiah Berlin and Michael Walzer as representative of the perspective and identifies "the commitment of liberalism to state neutrality in matters of personal belief, its resolute individualism, its stress on liberty, on procedure, and on the universality of human rights, and . . . its concern with the equitable distribution of life chances" (2001: 258).

nificantly, says Kahn, its construction of the self-interested individual takes no account of people's "will to love," as expressed in acts of sacrifice for community, faith, and the sovereign.

Liberalism too has historical roots in Christian thought and experience. But, in its modern form in the academy, it views faith-based voices in the marketplace of ideas with skepticism, even alarm, for their supposed intransigence and volatility (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 1988). Anthropology's ambivalence with regard to Christianity has been especially strong.<sup>3</sup> Robbins (2003:193) identifies the difficulty as follows: "neither real others nor real comrades, Christians wherever they are found make anthropologists recoil by unsettling the fundamental schemes by which the discipline organizes the world into the familiar and the foreign" (cf. Howell 2007).

Recently, however, members of the new subfield, the "Anthropology of Christianity" (Bialecki 2008; Cannell 2006; Elisha 2011; Keane 2007; Luhmann 2012; Robbins 2004), have made the suggestion that anthropologists engage in dialogue with theologians—and have provided an excellent example. Robbins began the conversation by identifying three ways anthropologists might interact with theology: (1) by examining theology's historical role in the formation of the discipline, (2) by studying theology for ethnographic purposes, and (3) by allowing theological works to "lead anthropologists to revise their core projects" (2006:287). The example is a recent issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly* in which scholars from a variety of fields and backgrounds consider "the critical potential of Christianity" (Engelke and Robbins 2010:624). The scholars engage the work of three contemporary continental philosophers (Agamben, Badiou, and Žižek) who are constructing models of change that reject incremental progress in favor of radical breaks, or "events." The conversion of the apostle Paul is the archetype for "the event as that which breaks into the present and allows for changes the present on its own could never generate" (Robbins 2010:649). There is particular salience in the discussion for Marxist theories of change, and relevance for all "critical thinkers not just to think *about* religion but also in important respects to think *with* it, or at least with some of its conceptual and sometimes its narrative resources" (Engelke and Robbins 2010:624–625).

Not surprisingly, this interest in the critical potential of Christianity follows on the heels of the new ethnography of Christians. In the context of ethnographic interviewing, "the outer to inner movement of the believer is replayed by the outer to inner movement of the observer as he engages in the engagement of the believer" (Peacock 2001:225). Hinson, who best demonstrates the respect for Christians that anthropologists have always avowed for their informants/con-

sultants, chides ethnographers for their dismissal of believers' religious views either through disregard or through explanation and assimilation as acts of "rationalizing the supernatural" under a kind of "ontological colonialism" (2000:330–333). Hinson suggests that, "with consultants as colleagues and with our demand for total 'explanation' dismissed as an exercise in imposed authority, we can jointly chart new paths of inquiry, drawing on collective strengths to explore the experienced realities of belief" (334).

## A Christian Perspectival Epistemology

In the construction of a broader anthropology, our starting point is that all human attempts to achieve a transcendent vantage point for engaging in the discussion are doomed to failure. This is because no human effort to discover truth is ever free of the limitations of context. We must be willing to engage in the project of understanding humanity by refraining from preemptively privileging any one perspective over the others. This acknowledgment of the limits of human discourse and understanding is not new for us as Christians; in fact, it emerges directly from our theology. Only God comprehends reality in its fullness. We as God's creatures cannot ever achieve complete or innocent knowledge. We know that our churches, mission agencies, and social programs have sometimes promoted intellectual hubris with culturally damaging consequences. But that hubris is far from being affirmed in the framing story of the Bible. Rather, the biblical texts repeatedly condemn human pride for foolhardy attempts at omniscience and destructive bids for power.

Significantly for our discussion here, in one interpretation, human problems stem from an original attempt to gain *all* knowledge. The terms "good" and "evil" in Genesis can be read as parallelism, indicating that the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden was the tree of the knowledge of "everything" (Gordon and Rendsburg 1998:36). Adam and Eve's intent was to gain a vantage point independent of God's revelation, circumventing the need for God and making a bid for God's power. The account of the Tower of Babel is manifestly about a bid for power, this time with the construction of a literal transcendent vantage point. There are parallels to the modernist project in this story, such as the fact that the Tower was a common enterprise, using a common language, and unifying humanity into a single community of knowledge (Middleton and Walsh 1995). God thwarted the project and intentionally disbursed the people in order to create local communities of knowledge that would fulfill the earlier injunction to fill the earth (Michael Rynkiewicz, personal conversation, April 21, 2010).

The impossibility of achieving omniscience as humans, however, does not make the pursuit of knowledge irrelevant or unimportant. On the contrary, much of the Christian tradition sees the scientific investigation of the world as a religious and theological imperative rooted in the goodness of creation. The task given to Adam and Eve is a scientific task—

3. For coverage of the debate between anthropologists and missionaries, see Headland (1996), Peacock (1996), Priest (2001), Stipe (1980), and the 1994 AAA presidential symposium on "Missionaries and Human Rights."

to explore, cultivate, know, and shape the world, socially and physically, as a way of responding to and knowing their Creator and as a way of enabling human flourishing. The Christian tradition believes that these motivations for human knowing are not mutually exclusive, and properly belong together. Thus, Christians are in no way precluded from the excitement, wonder, discovery, and illumination that come from the scientific investigation of the world, anthropology's first task, and are seriously charged with the proper care of creation and of their fellow creatures, anthropology's second task.

Still, it is only from a situated perspective, a view from somewhere, that the truth can be ascertained at all, and it is only with the interpretive framework of a community of faith that it can be fully apprehended. Epistemologists from Wittgenstein (2001), to Kuhn (1996) and Polanyi (1974), and now to Habermas (1985) and Gadamer (1989) have made this abundantly clear. Thus, in terms of a method of discourse, it is critical that the dialogue be engaged with both "an attitude of generosity" (Gadamer 1989) and "universal intent" (Polanyi 1974), neither one without the other. That is, in an arena of "committed pluralism" (Lesslie Newbigin's term), discussants must be open to the truth in the other, while at the same time committed to their own truth as having potential relevance beyond themselves.

Here we find the biblical epistemology of witness to be compelling. In biblical history, God reveals truth to chosen people who are entrusted with that truth for the purpose of announcing it to others. The witness does not know God's truth in totality or from God's perspective. Rather, the witness delivers the message from the vantage point of his or her own particular time, place, and social position as a *clue* to universal reality (Newbigin 1989:99–100). Furthermore, the message itself is not an abstracted proposition externally imposed on a limited circumstance; in fact, its interpretation presupposes the context in which it is presented. Moses's message that God had chosen a people was made meaningful by the circumstance of their slavery in a foreign land. Jesus's message that the Kingdom of God had arrived was made meaningful by the circumstance of the Roman occupation of Palestine. The New Testament disciples' witness to Jesus's resurrection was not as a Greek philosophical proposition but as a Hebraic historical event, the sign of the Messiah.<sup>4</sup>

In true postmodern fashion, a witness speaks truth from a grounded and specific identity, within the context of a larger narrative that gives meaning to it under the conditions of the hermeneutical circle. Still, witness is purposeless if it does not break out of the hermeneutical circle and make contact with

4. Goldstone and Hauerwas (in Engelke and Robbins 2010) unpack the biblical notion of witness in more depth than we are able to do here. They describe it as "a mode of being in the world" (775) and note a significant parallel to the experience of the ethnographer, citing Nancy Scheper-Hughes's comment that "the work of witnessing is what lends our work its moral (at times its almost theological) character" (Engelke and Robbins 2010:777).

others to deliver the message. In Christian history, the missionary efforts of the apostles Paul and John involved translating Hebrew concepts into Greek terms, a model followed by Christian missionaries ever since. Sanneh (1989) points out that the nationalist movements of the twentieth century were in part fueled by the validation of local cultures implied by Bible translation. So, Christianity's epistemology is of a universal truth that *permeates* rather than transcends. It is *revelatory* of mysteries grasped by specific people in specific times and places and then conveyed to others (cf. Muck 2011).

### An Example: The Problem of Violence

What difference might the employment of Christian theology as a critical tool make to anthropological research and recommendations? Minimally, it would provide a broader and richer understanding of humanity as more than just a species in nature. Perhaps maximally, it would provide renewed hope for humanity's redemption from the nightmare of its own failings. As an example, we investigate here the problem of human violence, both toward one another and toward the earth, to demonstrate the value added of including religious thinking in the anthropological discourse.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Theological Anthropology of Violence*

Christian theological anthropology views humanity broadly as (1) created in the divine image for communion with God, creation, and the other, (2) disoriented and turned in upon itself through a primordial act of fear, pride, and denial, resulting in (3) the gifts and powers of humanity being used for the destruction of creation, others and self, but (4) not beyond the gracious and redemptive work of God, who restores to creatures their divinely given gifts, their divinely grounded dignity, and their divinely given tasks. Redemption means the restoration of the image of God within us, and our appointment to the task of being other-oriented stewards of creation (Flett 2005, 2012; Middleton 2005).

The human capacity to construct culture is something that emerges from the very core of the image itself, and something that God delights in, particularly as it is a reflection of God's own creativity and desire for creation to flourish. Humans bear a responsibility to care for creation and to construct their own order of existence in accordance with an ecology of relationships characterized by peace. So when humans till the soil, create families, invent languages, construct villages, towns, and cities, and establish governments, they are fulfilling the cultural mandate to "be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28), with the end purpose of producing *shalom* for creation (Wright 2004).

God did not mandate the creation of culture and the cultivation of creation without also gifting human beings with the power to fulfill that mandate. "Dominion," the biblical

5. Our example is from Christianity because we are Christians, but of course our argument is that all religious thinking should be considered.

term for this second gifting, has no doubt at times been grossly misunderstood (Bauckham 2002). But, in the Bible, the power of dominion is strictly defined and bounded. It is given by a creative and gracious God to human beings in the image of God for the purpose of promoting *shalom* and delight. Dominion is not limitless power to do what the power-bearer wishes, but rather power to accomplish the goals set by the power-giver. Those goals are peace and *shalom*, not anthropocentric desolation of creation or ethnocentric violence against others. When dominion is misused, human beings are held accountable before God for it. But when exercised properly, it provides a purpose for responsible action beyond any rationale that can be provided by naturalism (Johnston 2010).

Thus, theological anthropology's explanation for human destructiveness is not in the fact that we were granted dominion over the earth but in the fact that we have fearfully, pridefully, and willfully abused that power. It is not in our nature as image-bearing creatures to be stewards of creation in isolation from the larger ecology of human life (our accountability to God, creation, and others). The violence we commit against the earth and against one another is counter to the very nature of the dominion entrusted to us. By our attempts to transcend our natural situation, we have abused the dominion we have been given and isolated ourselves from the accountability that would preserve all that God intended for creation. Hence, God's action in evicting us from the Garden of Eden, the original state of grace, is not harsh or ruthless but protective of this larger ecology for the sake of both humanity and the earth. By humbling ourselves, and thereby recovering God's grace, we can be restored to our appropriate place in creation as God's stewards.

### *Secular Anthropology of Violence*

Anthropology has viewed humanity as a successful species in nature despite its self-destructive tendencies. Early anthropologists, working under the relative stability of colonialism, imagined cultures as progressing from primitive to civilized, with increasing levels of order and rationality. The root of violence, or aggression, was believed to be in humanity's animal past, and the hope was that our destructive impulses would be reined in by the growth and development of civilization. Tylor's successor at Oxford, R. R. Marett, wrote, "There is no biological ground for supposing that the warlike strain in our breed is being gradually eliminated. Yet, though the animal and impulsive basis of human character tends to be constant, a system of moral education can do much to bring our warlike and peaceful propensities into harmony" (1920:28). Post-Boas, ethnographers shifted to imaging modernity negatively, and traditional cultures as pristine wholes. Now the solution lay in a Rousseauian past rather than a Lockean future. Still, anthropology's hope was in the social order to protect humanity from its own aggressive impulses.

Gradually, the pristine view of culture was complexified by the acknowledgment of the existence of intracultural conflict.

Initially this was done by incorporating conflict into structural functionalist models or by presenting it as necessary to stages of historical development. But such attempts to eliminate the full sting of violence by representing it as functional increasingly failed as the postcolonial world became increasingly violent, and as ethnographic data challenged the notion that cultures left alone by modernity are naturally harmonious. Even now, the question remains, "Is culture our life insurance against an innate violence inherited from nature? Or is culture, on the contrary, the very source of violence?" (van Binsbergen 1996; cf. Girard 1987).

After nearly a century of "embarrassed silence" on the subject (van Binsbergen 1996), anthropologists are now doing with violence what they do best with any human phenomenon; they are documenting it with ethnography. The project began by describing the genocidal effects of world markets on indigenous peoples (Bodley 2008), thereby acknowledging the violent underpinnings of modernity. It then moved to portraying the bloody political struggles for control of the postcolonial state, thereby debunking the myths of primordial ethnicity and national consensus (Appadurai 1998). And finally, it is now identifying local forms of violence such as rape, domestic abuse, hate crimes, ritual cruelty, terrorism, and brutality, thereby acknowledging the sickness at the heart of humanity by documenting it in sometimes gruesome detail.

### *The Deeper Issue, Human Evil*

For theologians, underlying the problem of human violence is the deeper problem of human evil. While anthropologists do not use the terms "good" and "evil" openly, their discourse is everywhere infused with a morality, held in common with the larger academy, that distinguishes the two. That morality is, in point of fact, genealogically linked to the Christian theological narrative. Goodness is in human flourishing; evil is a disordering, or destruction, of that original purpose. But theologians locate the problem in a distortion and corruption of human motivation, while cultural anthropologists, at least, blame the failure on human institutions. Locating a problem is critical to its solution, and this latter solution begs the question. If it is social orders, which are human constructions, that are problematic, what then *in human beings* is the original source of the problem? Modernity tacitly located the problem of evil primarily in human ignorance, optimistically expecting that time and education would resolve the matter. Postmodernity (following Nietzsche) has located the problem more accurately in human willfulness and has convincingly demonstrated that increased knowledge leads not to increased tolerance of one another, but to increased means of state control (Foucault 1995). It would seem that our attempt to know everything, rooted as it is in the desire for domination, is a part of the problem of violence, not its solution.

Furthermore, it would seem that the notion of human autonomy as the primary meaning of "freedom," a twisted form of dominion, is also to blame. Ernest Becker (1997) has

suggested that the desire for both comprehensive knowledge and unrestricted power is, in the final analysis, an attempt to deny the fundamental frailty and finiteness of the human creature by grasping at immortality. This explains how and why in the production and reproduction of all of our social systems, power is constantly being created and used in ways that perpetuate violence in all of its forms. It is our evil tendency to deny our creaturely status, to escape our place in the ecology of life, to attempt, in fact, to achieve omnipotence and immortality under the guise of quests for security and significance, that causes violence. Hence, we turn next to a consideration of the need for redeemed motives in the production of an ethic that will protect us all from the ill effects of violence.<sup>6</sup>

### *An Ethic to End Violence*

Liberalism's solution to the problem of violence is the ethic of tolerance, a granting of permission for others to be different from ourselves. Tolerance, however, operates by segregating people rather than reconciling them, that is, by preventing the *real* discussion that might bring about a common understanding and intent. As Bellah (1996:203) has suggested, the ethic of tolerance is merely a "strict adherence to procedural rules" in the absence of a "way to discuss the relative merits of values and lifestyles." Furthermore, the principle of tolerance is simply not strong enough to deal with the reality of human evil. In Christian terms, creatures who are willing to challenge God in order to lay claim to God's dominion are not likely to honor the rights to power of others.

Christianity's solution to the problem of violence is not tolerance, but love. The theologian Miroslav Volf (1996), a Croatian who lived through the Serbian burning, raping, and terrorizing of his own people, states, "Modernity has set its high hopes in the twin strategies of *social control* and *rational thought*" (28).<sup>7</sup> The hope is that by coming to rational agreement, we will be able to construct systems of justice that adequately restrain violence. But, says Volf, this hope is vainly founded on the premise that people will be truthful in the process. At their very best, "in a world so manifestly drenched with evil everybody is innocent in their own eyes" (79). Thus, systems of justice will always seem most rational when biased in favor of the evaluators. When these evaluators gain the power of the state, members of other groups, with other views on what is rational, will suffer. The critical question, then, is not what is the perfect system of justice to restrain human evil, but "*what kind of selves [do] we need to be in order to live in harmony with others?*" (21). It is simply ineffective to

6. Parker Palmer (1993) suggests that the motivation for our desire to know is critical. He identifies three motivations: curiosity, control, and love. Without the last of these, the other two motivations will produce destruction. But with love, knowing can be a means of restoring integrity to relationships.

7. All emphases in the Volf quotes are in the original.

address problems in the social order without first addressing problems in human identity and motivation.

From a Christian perspective, the identity that we need to recover is the image of God within us. For Volf, this means becoming like God specifically in the willingness to embrace the other in advance of the other's justification. It finds its model in "the self-giving love of the divine Trinity as manifested on the cross of Christ" (1996:25). "On the cross God renews the covenant by *making space* for humanity in God's self. The open arms of Christ on the cross are a sign that God does not want to be a God without the other—humanity—and suffers humanity's violence in order to embrace it" (154). Thus, our willingness to embrace others in advance of their justification is in imitation of God's offer of grace to us in advance of our own justification. We simply give to others what we have already received from God.<sup>8</sup>

How would anthropology's conversation about violence, including its scientific understanding of the phenomenon and its instrumental efforts to alleviate the suffering, be enhanced by an acknowledgment of a distortion in human motivation and a need for an ethic of love? First, locating the problem correctly in the human heart would allow anthropologists to identify more exactly the means by which violence is encoded in human institutions (Priest 1997), and second, demanding that institutions measure up to an ethic of love would more effectively promote and protect marginalized peoples (Meneses 2007), a goal of the discipline since its very beginning. Anthropology's purpose of protecting and nourishing the best in human nature and its expressions would be promoted.

### Concluding Reflections

At the 2009 meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Philadelphia, the question was asked, "What is the relevance of anthropology in today's world?" Discussion over the role of relativism, the social construction of cultural identities, and the nature of anthropology's publics were all invited. In regard to the last of these subjects, the question was asked, "What kinds of publics might we seek to address (or even produce), with our work, *and how do we push the field's epistemological and presentational conventions in order to effectively do so?*" (emphasis added).

Anthropology has studied the full circumstances of the human condition with the best qualitative methods. Through skilled ethnography, it has made sense of alternate views of the world and permitted marginalized people to speak in their own voices, thereby contributing to intercultural, interethnic, and even international understanding. Its adoption of cultural relativity, the notion that people must be correctly understood before their beliefs and behaviors can be appraised (to be distinguished from cultural relativism, the notion that these ways are necessarily equally good; cf. Geertz 1984) has ap-

8. Volf's point is confirmed by the history of the involvement of evangelicals in social justice movements. As an example, see Hartley (2011).

propriately educated its public. The adoption by the public of the highly constructed term “culture” is evidence of this success. Diversity, equality, and humanism are all packaged in, creating an ethic by which all people have a right to speak authentically from their own contexts.

But anthropology’s exclusion of religious thought from its discourse is at odds with a public that is largely composed of people with religious commitments. In fact, the epistemological and presentational conventions currently in place have restricted the conversation, even in reflexive ethnography, to those anthropologists possessing a *de facto* atheism.<sup>9</sup> Recently, in an article entitled “Gandhi or Gramsci,” Halliburton has suggested that, “despite our fundamental effort to be deferential to alternative ways of perceiving the world, we have generally failed to engage prestigious, literate non-western philosophers and social analysts as what I call ‘authoritative sources’ [of theory] in our work” (2004:794). In general, non-Western thinkers are less inclined to segregate their religious commitments from their philosophical thought. Thus, the insights of one such as Gandhi, which mix religious and political matters with scientific ones (unlike Gramsci), are rejected as sources of theory because they do not fit “something like scriptural authority in anthropology” that would require them to use a more “detached and skeptical” approach (Halliburton 2004:813). The result is that anthropologists with religious convictions must choose to converse in secular terms or be construed as informants. And, as Geertz (2001:33) has pointed out, there is an “inherent moral asymmetry of the fieldwork situation” that places the investigator on the moral, as well as the intellectual, high ground. By being willing to study, but not to consider, religious thought, anthropology has taken the moral high ground against religion.

Furthermore, the secular academy’s rejection of teleology has left it without a basis for hope for humanity. As Christians, we believe the purpose of our existence is to know and love both God and one another. The Hebrew term *lada’at* equates knowing with loving, barring the possibility of truly knowing others without loving them as well. Thus, we experience the attempt to know others as ethnographers as one process with our effort to love them as Christians. In addition, because we do not place our faith ultimately in our own understanding, we view ourselves as “patient revolutionaries” (Newbiggin 1989:209), working toward social change without losing hope or becoming dismayed at the persistence of evil despite our best efforts.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, there is the not insignificant question of the impact that an expanded discourse would have on research methods and findings. Here we remind our readers that we do not believe a transcendent vantage point, commonly called “ob-

jectivity,” exists for any researcher. Anthropology has always acknowledged the role of subjectivity in research on humans (with more or less ambivalence). Still, we recognize that some limits must be placed on any disciplinary enterprise lest it lose its central definition and purpose. The anthropological method is ethnography, and ethnography rests on the principle that, with sufficient goodwill and effort, others can be understood in their own terms. Attempts to distort the ethnographic data, either by imposing theory or by reinterpreting it in religious terms, are not valid. Yet, just as being human can assist ethnographers to understand their subjects, so being religiously committed can assist them to comprehend, and even validate, their subjects’ own points of view. Thus, we believe that the inclusion of religiously committed perspectives in the anthropological discourse has the potential to deepen, rather than divert, the purposes of anthropological ethnography.

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## Comments

### Simon Coleman

Department for the Study of Religion, Jackman Humanities Building, Room 333, 170 St. George Street, University of Toronto, Ontario M5R 2M8, Canada (simon.coleman@utoronto.ca). 3 V 13

Let me tell you a story. Years ago, when doing fieldwork among Prosperity Christians in Uppsala, I attended a lecture held at a meeting of local Christian students. The speaker, a member of a local charismatic ministry, began to tell us which disciplines were good for us to study and which had more dubious connotations. As he took us through the disciplines—economics, law, the natural sciences, and so on—I began to fear the worst. Sure enough, anthropology came pretty much at the bottom of the pile, accused of relativizing God out of existence. But here’s the punch line: it was not alone. What was the other dangerous topic, to be avoided at university? Theology.

Okay, there’s a second punch line. The very ministry that the speaker came from was in the process of setting itself up as a university. And what was it teaching? Business and media studies, for a start—but also theology and even a course or two in anthropology.

What is the moral of my story? Well, it can mostly be expressed as questions. If we are to engage with Christianity in doing anthropology, whose Christianity do we choose? Just the one that fits most closely with our vision of what an-

9. We realize, of course, that there have been well-known Christian anthropologists, such as Evans-Pritchard, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, and Kenneth Pike. But even these could not use their theological presuppositions, or Christian “voice,” in their anthropological theorizing.

10. For examples of contemporary work in Christian transformational development, see Bronkema and Brown (2009) and Backues (2009).



thropology should be—a vision that surely has been enabled and not merely constrained by genealogies of secularism and liberalism? And what should I do as an ethnographer who does not see himself as theologically aligned (at least in any conscious way)? Should I be attempting to assimilate both your vision of Christianity and that of my fieldworkers? And how do I deal with the problem that theology is not Christianity per se? Is it not always already a contentious translation of what some of my informants would see as true, living faith, and thus so much more than theological narrative can provide?

I have three more queries. Footnote 9 states that well-known Christian anthropologists such as Evans-Pritchard, Victor Turner, and Mary Douglas could not use their theological presuppositions in their anthropological theorizing. This may be a footnote, but it contains an important claim about anthropology's exclusionary tendencies. But is it true? There is the point that you make about anthropology having some Christian roots: we can certainly agree on that. And sure, these roots have often been unnoticed or even repressed by some scholars. But when Victor Turner wrote about *communitas*, was he not adopting, at least in part, a Christian voice? And do Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (1966) and *Natural Symbols* (1970) contain no Catholic sensibility? Directly after reading your paper, I happened to reread Malcolm Ruel's (1997:4) remark on *Nuer Religion* (1956), where Ruel argues that Evans-Pritchard appeared to be interested as much in theology as in anthropology, giving "substance to the Nuer concepts in terms of a religious viewpoint to which he himself subscribes."

Then there is your proposal, which is located at the beginning of your section "An Example: The Problem of Violence," that using Christian theology as a critical tool "would provide a broader and richer understanding of humanity as more than just a species in nature." But that for me crystallizes so many further questions. At one level, the richness of whatever understanding of humanity I have gleaned from anthropology comes precisely from my learning to see us as "just" a species in nature. That is kind of the whole point of what we do, isn't it? And what's more, it is a point that has not just epistemological and ontological implications, but ethical ones, too. My vision of what anthropology can do for us all is tied up with my conviction that there is a practical, ethical dimension involved in demonstrating to anybody who will listen that, yes, we are just another species.

Finally, I feel that your piece starts off talking about religion, then deals mostly with Christianity in the middle sections, and takes us back to religion at the end. In another footnote (n. 5), you say that your example relating to violence comes from Christianity because you are Christians. But if you are talking about religion, should you not have attempted to bring scholars together from different religious traditions? Would that have helped your argument, or been irrelevant to it, do you think?

I am asking all these questions because your paper helps

to stimulate them, so thank you for that. And I also want to thank you for two further aspects of your paper, which I suspect are going to be all too easy to overlook. One is your particular form of writing as "witness," where you have managed to bring five authors together into a single text. (I would have liked to have heard more about what was involved in doing that.) The other is your insistence that anthropology has to think much more clearly about its various publics and how to communicate with them. Amen to that!

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### Omri Elisha

Department of Anthropology, Queens College, CUNY, 65-30 Kissena Boulevard, Queens, New York 11367, U.S.A. (omri.elisha@qc.cuny.edu). 15 V 13

The stereotype that religiously committed people do not embrace intellectual challenges is unfortunate. I have met many evangelical Christians, including this group of authors, who greet opportunities for informed debate with refreshing enthusiasm. I am therefore pleased to respond to this thought-provoking essay with utmost respect and some provocations of my own.

The authors challenge us to contemplate the scope of anthropological discourse, especially how the discipline addresses questions of human nature and the standards dictating what forms of evidence are validated or excluded in the name of liberal secularism. As a committed humanist (dare I say) I am basically sympathetic to the suggestion that anthropology might "expand its discourse" to include scholars with theological commitments without insisting that they suppress them in the process. Theology, after all, is part of the genealogy of the discipline.

However, my appreciation for this argument—which revisits debates from the Scientific Revolution—stumbles on a few key points. The case rests on an abstract premise that anthropology is constrained by its liberal/secular inclinations, resulting in a failure to make real headway in its scientific and instrumental tasks. But little evidence is given to demonstrate the exact nature of this constraint. How have our contributions to human understanding and progress been limited by the fact that most anthropologists do not explicitly recognize religious doctrines or revelations as grounds for empirical research? Precisely, how would the work we do be improved by broadening our epistemology in this way? Notwithstanding the case made for the study of violence, this "instrumental" aspect of the argument remains elusive.

Another problem concerns the "epistemology of witness" that drives the Christian anthropology advocated in this essay. In this regard I am keen to point out a telling mischaracterization of postmodern theory. The authors suggest that orthodox Protestant theology shares a foundational affinity with postmodern theory, insofar as both recognize that the pursuit of truth is always defined by situational factors and contexts.

While this much can be agreed upon, postmodern anthropology posits a very different sense of the nature of truth to begin with.

Whereas the authors believe that social science at its best unlocks a universally objective Truth, observable in the order of God's creation but also uniquely discerned through special revelations such as the Bible, postmodern epistemologies present a view of truth as discursively constructed from the start. In other words, we are not conduits or transmitters of Truth, as evangelists believe. Rather we are active *producers* of knowledge and ways of knowing that come to be recognized and internalized as "true." This is not a denial of empirical reality so much as recognition that the objects and inquiries we apprehend through empirical research, as well as our findings, are intrinsically fluid and contingent.

I bring up this discrepancy not to discredit the authors' argument but to highlight the stakes involved in allowing the distinctions between anthropology and theology to become blurred, especially when it comes to the Christian epistemology of witness, which I consider to be at odds with anthropology's greatest strength.

When I discovered cultural anthropology, I was drawn to it not because of its claims of scientific objectivity or its liberal promises, but because through ethnography we can grasp at the complexities of the human condition by telling the stories of the world. Surely there is an aspect of bearing witness here as well, but it is not the same as what evangelicals mean by "witness." In the missionary imagination, the stories of the world exist, first and foremost, to instantiate, and ultimately to serve the story of God. The Gospel is a commanding metanarrative, one that is already written and one that subsumes all.

There are those who argue that secular anthropologists still rely on grand narratives and liberal teleologies as well. This is undoubtedly true. Nonetheless, theocentric paradigms are qualitatively distinct from ethnographic inquiries and should remain so. I am not troubled by academic scholars who believe in a volitional deity called God, and who allow their faith commitments to inform scholarly pursuits. But when Christian scholars propose a dialogue where biblical orthodoxy is introduced as a basis for social analysis and theory, they bestow upon that deity a privilege of authorship that might best remain in the hands of mere mortals.

Anthropological theories and methods may be incomplete from a faith perspective, but they are derived from stories that we humans tell ourselves about ourselves. Surely we could listen more intently to the stories of God, and other spiritual beings, as theologians and religious teachers have taught us to do for centuries. But if we proceed as though anthropology and theology are simply two versions of the same conversation, we run the risk of muddying rather than expanding our discourse. The power we have to pose innumerable and sometimes unanswerable questions about the world is different from God's power to answer them through special revelations. This distinction is productive and should be preserved.

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### Ananta Kumar Giri

Madras Institute of Development Studies, 79 Second Main Road, Gandhi Nagar, Adyar, Chennai-600 020, India (aumrkishna@gmail.com). 8 V 13

### Rethinking Anthropological Engagement with Religious Commitment

In their essay, Meneses and colleagues raise important questions about anthropology's epistemological and political foundations and urge us to realize the limits of its liberal and secular assumptions. They write about their own vocation: "We are Christians working within a socially engaged and intellectually open theological framework." They offer a Christian perspectival epistemology that urges us to understand the limits of the human, especially human, will to omniscience and power. Taking the issue of violence as an example, they confront the theological approach to violence with the anthropological and argue how culture-bound explanations fail to realize the existence of evil in self, culture, and society. While they interpret evil in terms of human propensity to arrogance and omniscience, here we can broaden and deepen the concept of evil in both spiritual and sociological directions, which links it to the dynamics of power in society and processes that hinder realization of potential of self, culture, society, Nature and the Divine (cf. Giri 2013a; Quarles van Ufford 2009; Wieworka 2012).

In their approach to cross-cultural interaction, Meneses and colleagues "find the biblical epistemology of witness to be compelling." They also write, "witness is purposeless if it does not break out of the hermeneutical circle and make contact with others to deliver the message." But is this model of witnessing adequate for cross-cultural colearning and dialogues? Is the witness eager to learn from and with the other, including her faith traditions, and not only deliver a message? The history of Christian evangelism painfully shows us how the so-called witnesses have rarely felt it their divine calling to understand and enter inside the faith worlds of other cultures, religions, and traditions. Meneses and colleagues give the example of St. Paul, who translated Hebrew concepts to Greek terms, but they do not self-critically reflect upon the limits of such a Pauline model. First, Paul gave a doctrinal and masculine institutional rigidity to the Christian religious and spiritual quest, which was much more open-ended before. Early Christianity, with its loose network of spiritual communities where women played an important role, was more open to other religions and traditions than Pauline institutionalized Christianity (see Chopra 2008). Second, from reality and calling of global Christianities, now we need to understand the limits of Greek philosophical frame of reference for Christian theology and embrace deeper border-crossing frames of conversations such as Vedanta from Indian traditions (cf. Radhakrishnan 1939). But such terms of translation cannot be done on the Pauline model. We need spiritual

seekers who are able to go beyond their own Christian traditions such as Swami Abhisikatananda, Bede Griffiths, and Raimundo Panikkar and interpret Christian theological terms such as “Trinity” in terms of Vedantic categories such as Satchidananda (Truth-Consciousness-Bliss; cf. Abhisikatananda 1975; Griffiths 1976; Panikkar 1977; also see Amaladoss 2008; Anand 1994, 2004; Visvanathan 2007). For S. Radhakrishnan, the preeminent philosopher from India, dialogue with Vedanta has a global significance for renewing Christianity.<sup>11</sup> Dialogue with Vedanta, along with other processes, can help Christianity to go beyond the limits of the prophetic and the historical in its tradition and realize the significance of the mystical and thus take part in creative processes of pluralization and planetary realizations in our world today (cf. Giri, forthcoming).<sup>12</sup>

This calls for realizing the limits of the Christian mode of being with the world. It is unfortunate that the authors are totally silent on the complicity of Christianity with colonialism, evangelism, and violence. Today, Christianity needs to be part of a global cross-cultural realization and dialogue. Christian epistemology often asserts exclusive claims to Truth. How does this embrace the challenge of multiperspectivalism and a multivalued logic of faith, life, culture, and society? Today, an epochal challenge before Christianity is to move from a logic of fullness to a logic of emptiness. As Felix Wilfred (1999:viii), himself a noted Christian theologian, writes: “The Christian attempts to cross over to the other, to the different, has been made by and large from the pole of being or fullness. This naturally creates problems, which can be overcome by activating also to cross over from the pole of nothingness or emptiness. The central Christian mystery of Jesus Christ offers the revelation of both fullness and nothingness—the total self-emptying. Many frontiers which are found difficult to negotiate and cross over could be crossed by making use of the other pole represented in the Christian mystery of emptiness

11. Radhakrishnan (1939:10) also raises the issue of cross-cultural realization and understanding of Christianity in India: “If Europe interpreted Christianity in terms of his own culture, Greek thought and Roman imagination, there is no reason why Indian Christian should not relate the message of salvation in Christ to the larger spiritual background of India. Possibly, India’s religious insight may help to revivify Christianity, not only in India but the world at large. Can’t we have a Vedanta tradition in Christianity? The late Max Muller thought of himself as a Christian Vedantin. There are thousands in the West today who have acquired a new and deeper impulse of religious life through the influence of Hindu thought. If even non-Indian Christian find it easier to understand Christianity in the light of Vedanta, it is unfortunate that Indian Christians are led to adopt an attitude of indifference, if not hostility, to Hindu religion and metaphysics.”

12. As S. Painadath (2007: 74) argues: “The Upanishads open to the Christian world the farther horizons of something of the mystery of the Divine. If one’s mind is open to the mystical quest of the Upanishads one cannot be fixated on the particular form of God’s revelation, nor can one be dogmatic about the concrete formulations in theology. . . . In this unending spiritual pursuit the Christian theologian meets the Hindu Vedantin; the interpretation of the spiritual dynamics of the New Testament is deepened by the mystical insights of the Upanishads.”

as self-abnegation, so as to reach a deeper perception of the mystery of God, the world and the self. Perhaps here lies something that could become an important program for Christianity and its theology at the turn of the millennium.” Wilfred here pleads for a reverse universality where Christians would learn from other traditions rather than just witness.<sup>13</sup> Meneses and colleagues talk about the limits of anthropocentrism, which is a challenge for both theology and anthropology, and here, for Wilfred, deep cross-cultural dialogues can help us: “The exaggerated anthropocentrism in Christian worldview and theology could be considerably tempered by of the Asian approaches to harmony” (2008:134).

Meneses and colleagues call for dialogue between the anthropological and the theological. But this can build on self-critical transformations in both. In both sociology and anthropology, there is a slow recognition of the limits of the sociological-anthropological approach and openness to grace and wholeness (cf. Bellah 1970; Clammer 2010; Giri 2012). At the same time, we need to understand the distinction between the two in order that we can creatively overcome the self-limitations of both the anthropological and the theological. As André Béteille (2009:204) argues: “The theologian is concerned primarily with questions of truth and efficacy of religious beliefs and practices. Such questions do not concern the sociologist in the same way. His primary aim is to observe, describe, interpret and explain the ways in which religious beliefs and practices actually operate.” In fact, theologians such as Wilfred employ critical socio-anthropological methods of empirical work in their theological studies as they realize the limits of the theological: “But the discipline of theology has its serious limitations when done from within its religious precincts” (Wilfred 2009:245). The necessary dialogue between the anthropological and the theological can build on such self-critical moves as other transformative initiatives in both anthropology and theology (see Smith 2007). The transformation of the anthropological today can base itself upon realizing the limits of anthropocentrism, nation-state, and culture-centered rationality and an integral realization of the human condition consisting of the autonomous and interpenetrating circles of the human, Nature and Divine. It can also build upon transformational theologies such as that of Paul Tillich (1957), where the theological includes the need for skeptical belief in matters not only of study of religion

13. Wilfred (2008:160) writes: “The idea of Christianity as mission spanning the whole of humanity as the recipient of its Good News, is a unilateral universality, whereas Christianity to be more completely universal requires multilateral universality which calls for the reading and interpretation of its message by diverse peoples through their conceptions of the destiny of the human family. If the outgoing universality is from God; so is incoming universality for which Christianity needs to make room. It is dogmatism and fostering of stratified Christian identity that makes it difficult to accept the incoming universality. The incoming universality is the movement by which Christianity receives the ways of the Spirit from other religions.”

but in one's faith.<sup>14</sup> This can nurture pathways of deeper dialogues between faith and reason, the epochal need for which was stressed by both Jürgen Habermas and then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict) in their now famous dialogue in Munich in 2004 (Habermas and Ratzinger 2007; see also Habermas 1997). This can also build upon movements in practical theology and public theology and transformations in critical theory as suggested in the works of Johannes B. Metz, Wilfred, and Habermas (Habermas 2003; Metz 1970; Wilfred 2010). It can also build upon border-crossing cross-cultural theology as in the inspiring works of Raimundo Panikkar (1977), who embodied deep and meditative pluralization. He studied the Vedas starting with his initial journey as a Catholic priest, and his Vedic *Mantramanjari: An Anthology of the Vedas for Modern Man and Contemporary Celebration* is a testament to the deep quest for the other from within theology. Francis Clooney (2010) also has cultivated a path of comparative theology by carrying our dialogues between Divine Mother and Virgin Mother in Hindu and Christian traditions.

Meneses and colleagues talk about the need to be engaged with the religiously committed. They offer a critique of the secular but do not realize the limitations of the religious, especially the religiously committed. Here the task is to be engaged in a self-critical critique of both the religious and the secular and on the way accept the challenge of spiritual critique and transformation. While the religious can be closed within a logic of closure, the spiritual is a permanent process of critique, creativity, and transformations. While engaging with the religiously committed, both the theological and the anthropological need to explore the dynamics of spiritual critique in religions as well as in the secular orders (Giri 2013b). While working with the religious and the secular, the challenge is to understand the vision and processes of a postreligious and postsecular world in the making and take part in the multiverse of epistemological, ontological, and world transformations that await us.<sup>15</sup>

14. It may be noted here that Tillich's theological approach has inspired seekers from other religious traditions such as Amina Wadud (2006) to launch a gender jihad in Islam.

15. Giani Vattimo (1999, 2002), another self-critical contemporary Christian, speaks of "After Christianity" and explores pathways of a post-Christian world. Love and nonviolence are the perennial flows of such a world. For Vattimo, love and nonviolence are the perennial legacy of Jesus. In a similar way could we all of us concerned explore pathways of "After Hinduism," "After Islam," and "After Buddhism" from our mothering spaces of belonging? In the work of Ramachandra Gandhi (1993), we find suggestions of a post-Hindu world. Religions are our mothers, but our mothers are not destined to die as mothers' wombs, and it is through cultivation of incoming universality that all of us concerned can realize the potential that our mothers love for all children and species of the earth and not only as human members of our group boundaries called Hindu, Christian, Muslims, Buddhists, etc.

### Naomi Haynes

Department of Social Anthropology, University of Edinburgh, 15a George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LD, United Kingdom (naomi.haynes@ed.ac.uk). 3 V 13

### Repairing an "Awkward Relationship"?

What does Christianity have to offer anthropology? This might seem like a strange question to ask, and a stranger one still to regard as unanswered. Indeed, as the authors of this article note, over the course of the past 2 decades in particular, the discipline has witnessed several responses to this question. Some, taking their cues from Talal Asad and others, have highlighted "the Christianity of anthropology" (Cannell 2005). In this vein, the answer to the question "What does Christianity have to offer anthropology?" is that it has already offered plenty. Indeed, insofar as it has muddled our understanding of things like religion, it has offered far too much. In contrast to the Christianity of anthropology, which has undoubtedly blunted our analytic categories, I would join the authors of this article in arguing that the anthropology of Christianity has had the opposite effect. Ethnographic engagement with Christian populations has expanded anthropological understanding of topics like cultural change (e.g., Robbins 2007) and subjectivity (e.g., Bialecki 2011), to take just two examples. Simply put, what Christianity, as an ethnographic object, has to offer anthropology, is quite a lot.

In their article, Eloise Meneses and her coauthors seek a rapprochement between the two responses I have just outlined. What they propose is that Christian ideas can help to address some of the more vexing problems of contemporary social science, including the issue of violence, which they deal with specifically. In so doing, their aim is to make Christian theological concepts work not as ethnographic data but as theoretical tools. There is nothing wrong with this move; indeed, a number of our most powerful analytic ideas—*hau*, *mana*, *taboo*—are ethnographic categories that have proven useful far beyond their contexts of origin. However, in choosing to frame their argument this way, I wonder whether the authors miss what is arguably the more powerful asset they have in bringing Christianity to bear on anthropology. Rather than employ the theological content of this religion in an effort to generate a new theoretical model, perhaps the most important thing Christianity—and religious commitment more generally—can offer anthropology is a particular kind of posture. Let me explain what I mean here.

In a short article about the "awkward relationship" (see Strathern 1987) between anthropology and theology, Joel Robbins (2006) outlines three ways that the latter might benefit the former. Meneses and her coauthors have helpfully laid these out in their discussion, so I will touch on them only briefly. In the first two instances, theology might benefit anthropology as a means of exploring the Christian roots of the discipline, on the one hand, and as a source of data about

Christianity, on the other. These points mirror the responses to the question about what Christianity offers anthropology that I laid out in the first paragraph. The third possible point at which theology might be useful to anthropology is found in the example of theologians themselves. The point here is that anthropology would do well to take a leaf from the “confidence” of theologians that “the differences they find are really fundamental ones that point to wholly different ways of living,” and by their concomitant belief that readers might change as a result of the encounter with those differences provided by theological writing (Robbins 2006:288). Theology takes otherness seriously and writes about it boldly, in a way that expects a response.

In this reading, theology is oriented toward otherness, an orientation that anthropologists should know well. Many of us were drawn to the discipline because of the worlds it opened up, the new ways to be human it presented. For at least some of us (e.g., Appadurai 2013), not to mention some of our most important forbearers (e.g., Mauss [see Hart 2007]), otherness is a framework for political practice, an active pursuit of alternative ways of organizing human life. Despite these roots, however, Robbins argues that anthropology has lost sight of the ability to speak about otherness in a meaningful way, and in so doing lost much of its disciplinary *raison d'être*, not to mention its political potential. The political possibilities of anthropology are precisely what Meneses and her coauthors, several of them theologians, seek to reinvigorate in their paper. Perhaps the primary way in which they have achieved their goal is not with the categories they propose, but with the quality of their voice as theologians and with the perspective they offer as religiously committed individuals. As representatives of the latter, these authors foreground an ethic of love as a new way of understanding human life; as representatives of the former, they write as though this ethic might well come to characterize the world inhabited by those outside their religious community. What, then, does Christianity have to offer anthropology? Perhaps even more than it realizes.

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### Glenn Hinson

Department of Anthropology/Folklore Program, Department of American Studies, CB #3115, 305-C Alumni Hall, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27599-3115, U.S.A. (ghinson@email.unc.edu). 20 V 13

## Engaging the Religiously Committed Other ... in the Field

Bravery is a quality often attributed to anthropologists, who are still widely seen by the public as adventurous explorers of otherness. Whether or not this attribution is merited, it certainly applies to the authors of this essay, whose bravery rests not in their encounter with otherness, but in their claim-

ing of self, and in their challenging of anthropology's claims to inclusivity and epistemological breadth. In laying bare the discipline's hesitation to unpack its own perspectival presumptions, and in simultaneously identifying the foundational convictions that guide their own practice, the authors invite new conversations about the role of faith in both the field and the academy.

It is not difficult to see how an openly articulated religious perspective could invite field-based conversations that might otherwise never unfold, conversations whose emergence hinges on a perception of shared belief. In my own fieldwork, consultants have often pressed discussions into places that they explicitly say they would never approach with one who did not share their foundational religious understandings. They see the sharing of beliefs—at least at some fundamental level—as a covenant that brings not only eased understanding but also a responsibility to representation without retreat, to a portrayal of faith's experiential fullness that, in their eyes, academic presentation all too often avoids. The sharing thus carries with it a charge to press beyond the bounded framings of “objectivity” and to present religious realities not as somehow “provisional” but instead as simply and wholly real. This covenantal understanding—one wherein one's consultants expect more from the ethnographer because of the open sharing of faith—both fosters trust and often deepens ethnographic conversations.

This deepening, though, depends on the sharing of beliefs. What happens when ethnographic conversations happen across faiths, when the articulation of one's beliefs foregrounds fundamental theological differences rather than similarities? Can we expect the sharing to extend beyond the boundaries of a given belief system (e.g., Christian-to-Christian conversations) to the *act of believing* itself, such that connection in, say, a Christian-to-Hindu conversation would find grounding in the very presence of faith? Would the simple fact that one is openly a believer, in other words, open doors of connectedness with those who believe differently?

The authors do not overtly address this issue, though they hint that this would be the case. When they say that believing ethnographers “must be open to the truth in the other” and predicate their practice in an ethic of love, they tacitly suggest that their own positioning as Christians does not hinder the crafting of cross-faith ethnographic covenants. This inference is muddled a bit, however, by their discussion of Christian witness, where they speak about believers' commission to deliver a biblically grounded message of truth. “Witness is purposeless,” they assert, “if it does not break out of the hermeneutical circle and make contact with others to deliver the message.” While they offer this within a framework of anthropological interpretation, one wonders how this “delivering of the message” would unfold in the field. Presumably, given the authors' declaration of openness to others' truths, this witness is both gentle and humble. Nonetheless, it begs further discussion.

How articulating one's faith might affect relationships in

the field raises larger questions about ethnographic practice and about the role that the illusion of objectivity plays in ethnography. The authors speak of objectivity as that mythic “transcendent vantage point” long claimed by anthropology (albeit a vantage point that the discipline both actively embraces and actively denies). One wonders, though, whether this claiming—particularly as it pertains to an ethnographer’s faith—is often more instrumental than real, whether the presentation of apparent “objectivity” is a strategy calculated to ease conversation by deflecting issues of belief. One can almost hear the advice given to beginning ethnographers: “Don’t talk about your faith, and it won’t get in your way.” The authors’ critique this advice for its unquestioned foregrounding of an impossible ideal; they could just as easily critique it for its essential dishonesty. After all, if ethnography’s goal is to build covenants of trust, then the instrumental claiming of “objectivity”—or, to put it another way, the nonclaiming of one’s own beliefs, whatever those are—is an act of deception that fundamentally undermines trust-building.

Of course, one could just as easily argue that the overt claiming of one’s faith risks invoking a world of presumption that itself challenges ethnographic encounter. These questions all merit further discussion. They also follow rather naturally from the authors’ provocative arguments about epistemology, inviting us to ask, “What would a Christian *ethnography* look like?” Perhaps it is here that the authors’ call is most compelling, in that it invites us to envision the enactment of religious principle not only in the interpretative arena but also in the everyday-ness of ethnographic practice, where the witness set forth here might well unfold as humble and compassionate engagement.

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### Brian M. Howell

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Wheaton College, 501 East College Avenue, Wheaton, Illinois 60187, U.S.A. (brian.howell@wheaton.edu). 8 V 13

From the foundations of our discipline qua discipline, questions of ethical and epistemological stance, and religious subjectivities, have been variously in and out of frame in anthropological inquiry (e.g., Maurice Leenhardt [see Clifford 1992]). These conversations have taken on new life as of late, as recent conversations vis-à-vis secularism have developed (e.g., Asad et al. 2009); questions of how anthropological inquiry and representation should position themselves in ethics or epistemology remain open and fruitful.

The authors here push the conversation in overtly theological terms that may cause some discomfort for anthropologists unaccustomed to such language. I can only imagine that reading a quotation such as this—“On the cross God renews the covenant by *making space* for humanity in God’s self. The open arms of Christ on the cross are a sign that God does not want to be a God without the other—hu-

manity—and suffers humanity’s violence in order to embrace it”—could cause any number of academics to double check that they have *Current Anthropology* and not *Christianity Today*. Yet theologically sectarian language should not put off those interested in the conversation of ethically engaged anthropology; on the contrary, this appeal to positioned intellectual and theological traditions should be considered indispensable to it.

In 1995, *Current Anthropology* published a pair of articles raising similar questions, with Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) taking the morally positioned stance and Roy D’Andrade (1995) the objectivist, “scientific” position. Framed as “objectivity versus militancy,” the two articles and accompanying comments took on the issue addressed here by Meneses and colleagues from a different, but complementary, angle; they asked how moral (not theological) epistemologies can or should shape anthropological inquiry and practice. D’Andrade’s representation of the objectivist position could be held up to the current article as a cogent response virtually unchanged from its original form. I will leave it to the reader to find his article and weigh his argument. In light of the article here, however, it is Scheper-Hughes’s argument for the “primacy of the ethical” that provides a fruitful comparison.

Like the current authors, Scheper-Hughes found scientific models of objectivity and neutrality insufficient for addressing issues in which various actors (including the anthropologist) find themselves inextricably entangled in moral politics. Interestingly, Scheper-Hughes’s own examples also drew on the analysis of violence. At base, her article sought to “expose [anthropology’s] artificial moral relativism and try to imagine what forms a politically committed and morally engaged anthropology might take” (1995:410).

Unsurprisingly, the usual suspects of postmodern and post-structuralist theory provide a deep well of analytical concepts, but they provide no resources for a moral engagement with the violence and injustice confronting her in the *favelas* of Brazil or the townships of South Africa. In the end, she turned to Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to argue for a “pre-cultural” ethics by which to judge goodness, rightness, evil, and ethics.

When I teach these articles to my students at a Christian liberal arts college, they inevitably find Professor Scheper-Hughes’s position appealing, but deficient. The generically “pre-cultural” notions of “the good,” disconnected from time and space—lacking an identifiably particular tradition (though deeply indebted to Jewish thought and history unacknowledged by Scheper-Hughes)—seems to raise more questions than it answers. What such a moral epistemology requires, my Christian students argue, is content, particularity, and specificity.

This is precisely what Meneses and colleagues suggest. While I think the claim that anthropology (in the singular?) has relied solely, or even principally, on liberalism and enlightenment epistemologies in the past several decades is reductionistic to the diversity of our discipline—as is their ap-

peal to “the” Christian tradition—their more central claim seems to me one worth emphasizing. Moral engagement in anthropology, or anywhere, comes most powerfully and cogently from particular moral traditions, not from “morality” generically defined.

As Michael Lambek (2012) recently argued, the epistemologies of secularism and religion are not incompatible but are incommensurable. This is vividly illustrated by the article here. I have no doubt that some could find the analysis of violence offered here unhelpful—or at least uninteresting—as it would provide little intellectual purchase from a naturalistic point of view. It should, however, be considered valid, and morally and ethically significant, given the recognition of a specifically positioned epistemology (see also Howell 2007).

The thrust of “Engaging the Religiously Committed Other” is not an either/or struggle over analytical supremacy, but a call to recognize the moral and historical particularity of inquiry and truth-claims (by now, an obvious point) and that anthropological truth claims made from within “anthropology’s theoretical repressed” (Cannell 2005:341) can yield morally and analytically cogent insights (a far less obvious point). Scheper-Hughes’s call for a militant anthropology is best served by those who have something built on a tradition that is identifiable and particular—a rock, if you will—rather than the sandy soil of a generalized ethics of the day.

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### David S. Lowry

Department of Anthropology, Hamilton Hall, American University, 4400 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20016, U.S.A. (lowry1872@gmail.com). 2 VII 13

“Engaging the Religiously Committed Other” is highly needed. It pushes us to take the epistemological frameworks of Christianity seriously. This is important because as anthropology distances itself from Christianity, it ignores the fact that Christian viewpoints contain an expertise that anthropology cannot match.

I began to understand this disparity when I was a doctoral student in anthropology. During my first semester of “core” courses, an instructor asked our graduate cohort to write an essay based on a fictional scenario. Essentially, we were asked what we would do—how we would react—if a student wanted to explain human origins in terms of creationism. I thought this was a brilliant prompt, and one that was sure to incite intellectual debate. However, the opposite occurred. When I responded in my essay that creationism was a valuable epistemological tool in any conversation about the origins of life, my paper was returned without a grade. My instructor asked me if I “believe evolutionary theory.” I returned with a quite different question: “Why is there no purpose within anthropology’s articulations of human origins?”

My willingness to search for some proof of human purpose

propelled me into a specific curiosity about why humans heal. As much as we have participated in constant warfare, we have maintained obligations to making others and ourselves whole. As we heal the human, we pay homage to the Divine and to senses that we have purposes that are worthy of preservation beyond the hunting and gathering of everyday life.

I think that anthropology’s distance from the elements that have motivated millennia of organized and purposeful healing is of great concern. What we need within anthropology is an outstanding and intimate conversation about how our ancestors developed mandates to preserve something (ourselves) that was perceived to have an inherent wholeness and unity. Christianity and other religious traditions became the keepers of the knowledge of this healing. Look at the Christian genealogies of hospital organizations in the last couple centuries. To agree with the authors of this article, the language of this healing has been love. It is important for us to understand how this love is constantly crafted to make sense of contemporary human problems.

This leads us to the issue of hope. To heal is to possess and offer hope. Christianity opposes anthropology most importantly because Christianity offers hope that anthropology cannot describe or provide. Anthropologists are experts in the articulation of the presence and importance of “webs of meaning” that humans spin, to use the famous words of Max Weber. However, if we acknowledge that these webs undergo destruction and are crafted again through healing, shouldn’t we attempt to understand how these webs—these cultures—are ultimately disposable and are filled, healed, and reconciled through connections between humans and the Divine?

I do not think it is coincidence that the sites of the greatest genocide in the world have often become the sites of the greatest Christian evangelism and revival (e.g., Rwanda, United States). While violence is greatly misunderstood, so is the spiritual rebuilding that tends to occur directly after it has taken place. That is why anthropology must meet theology, especially in a world filled with the emergence of new types of violence.

In the end, however, I think questions about life—and the healing of life—must exist beyond anthropology and theology. Many other scientists, such as mathematicians, have been highly critical of the Darwinian worship that occurs in anthropology and other biological sciences. Many are not “believers.” Yet, they see patterns in contemporary models of “life” and “intelligence” that mirror explanations of Divine creation and purpose. Thus, the tension between anthropology and Christianity speaks to a very complex world of contradicting symbols and incompatible languages used to articulate particular truths about human existence. “Engaging the Religiously Committed Other” begins a conversation that mandates much more than Christian inclusion. This article begs a highly needed interdisciplinary and intellectually open discussion about what faces us as witnesses of human existence today. It is an exciting time.

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**James Peacock**

306 North Boundary Street, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514, U.S.A. (peacock@unc.edu). 25 VI 13

The essay cogently develops the point of view of religiously committed anthropologists and theologians. The authors expound a religiously committed anthropology, thus demonstrating important understandings that are missed by a secular viewpoint. While the authors' perspective is essentially Christian, similar arguments can be and sometimes have been set forth by Muslims and perhaps others.

This alternative to the secular perspective that has shaped anthropology during the past hundred years or more is suggestive for deepening encounters with religion. I would extend the discussion by highlighting one important point suggested by the author's quote of a comment I made in "Belief Beheld" (Peacock 2001). I spoke of "engaging with engagement," that is, the anthropologist who is not a believer, hence not engaged in that way with belief, may nevertheless engage with those who are. This point can be taken negatively or positively. Negatively, it critiques a narcissistic postmodernism that gives undue weight to the process of field research as compared to the experience researched; the learning experience counts more than what is learned. Alternatively, one can argue that what we learn matters more than how we learn it, so one should not submerge the "native point of view" in the view of the anthropologist. Positively, however, this point is connected to another allusion by the authors that opens up an avenue for enrichment. The authors draw on Hans Georg Gadamer, as I have also, to remind us that the experience of research—observation and interpretation—is more than just "method" but is also a "truth." In encountering an object of study, one digs into one's "prejudices" or "foreunderstandings." This encounter connects subject and object as part of a process that can be considered deeper than the specific object encountered. Applying this point to the study of religion, one would recognize that the shared experience of believer and beholder, as one beholds belief, is itself a "truth" that goes beyond specific "beliefs" of either believer or beholder. Such beliefs might be, for example, in a certain deity or of particular points of doctrine (e.g., the Trinity in Christianity) or, on the other hand, in a secular worldview or perhaps in an alternative theology. For example, a Muslim friend once zealously criticized the irrationality of Christianity as exemplified by belief in the Trinity, in the virgin birth, and in Christ's resurrection, but now he works with Christians on important shared civic efforts. Also, he and I have been friends for decades, and our own friendship is deeply meaningful to us both, even if he interprets it within a Muslim theological framework that I can behold but not share as a believer.

Focusing on shared engagement as a process perhaps leads into a kind of process philosophy and theology like that espoused by Whitehead, while leading away from what Whitehead cautioned against, "the fallacy of misplaced concrete-

ness." That fallacy might be exemplified by reifying and reducing a religious encounter to specific items of creed attributed to each party or an encounter between believer and scientist as items of creed for each, for example, believer or secularist. Such reifications block processes that include sharing of experiences and values or beliefs, worldviews that, as Gadamer teaches, undergird a "truth" and "method." This truth/method is a basis for fieldwork as well as for other encounters that include interfaith dialogues and conflict resolution.

Where this line takes us has its own drawbacks, for it may collapse crucial commitments including beliefs into an ongoing process of communication and community. An advantage, however, is that it opens discussion beyond the blockage that results from attributing specific and conflicting creeds to separate parties or persons who would thus fail to grasp a truth about their method of encountering each other.

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**Robert J. Priest**

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2065 Half Day Road, Deerfield, Illinois 60015, U.S.A. (rpriest@tiu.edu). 7 V 13

While much of our world is religious, anthropologists have normatively conducted scholarly conversations in a secular voice and with naturalistic assumptions. The authors of this paper invite us to reconsider this normative stance. I endorse the invitation and provide commentary using the lens of "auto-ethnography."

My socialization into anthropology largely presupposed conversation among those who were not religious. While anthropologists have drawn concepts from many sources, they have policed the boundary with theology (Klass 2000). So as a Christian with prior theological training, it felt to me that any explicit effort on my part to draw positively from Christian theology would discredit me. My choices, it seemed, were (1) to abandon anthropology in favor of theology and Christian faith (thus self-selecting out of the discipline), (2) to live schizophrenically interacting separately with two different communities by means of two incommensurable discursive systems, (3) to abandon Christian faith and theology in favor of a secular anthropology as normatively practiced (thus to "convert" or "go native"), or (4) to publicly pursue anthropology while grappling privately with theological and faith-informed aspects of my thinking.

I initially chose the fourth option. This required a marked divide between frontstage and backstage behavior. Publicly, I read, interacted with, and cited assigned and approved sources. Privately, I read and received stimulation from a wide variety of Christian scholars and theologians. But I seldom quoted these or explicitly made them central to my argument. At one level, this worked for me. My MA thesis under George Stocking (Priest 1984) was awarded the Earl and Esther Johnson Prize by the University of Chicago. While privately my



religious and theological understandings had informed my thinking for this thesis, the actual argument and evidence I employed made no reference to religious or theological understandings. That is, the final product was intended to stand or fall based on public argument and evidence uncontaminated by religion. Similarly, Christian theological understandings informed my assessment of theories about “defilement imagery” that I addressed in my PhD dissertation at UC Berkeley (Priest 1993). But they operated in a surreptitious fashion that was backstage and never formally acknowledged. My public argument was intended to be persuasive to a secular audience, uncontaminated by reference to theological thought.

When I later took a job teaching in a theological seminary, my situation shifted. Now I was expected to write in ways that explicitly integrated the theological and anthropological. It was, of course, personally liberating not to feel the need constantly to censor the religious side of my thinking. But there were other benefits as well. I aspired to a public anthropology that would influence nonanthropologists. And since much of the public is religious, efforts to engage controversial topics in a secular voice may well be less effective than efforts that address the anthropological from within a shared theological frame. I found this to be true when writing about race and ethnicity (Priest and Nieves 2007) and am currently finding it to be true as I work to address witchcraft accusations and violence in parts of Africa. That is, an explicitly secular voice limits the public influence of anthropology among those who are religious, whether they be American or African.

But there were also negative sides to this. Any writing explicitly grounded in Christian theology would seem, on the face of it, to be of value primarily to Christians, and thus marginal to anthropology as a discipline. And thus the issue of “voice” has been a constant struggle. I have tried to show the value of theological concepts for anthropology more broadly (Priest 2000) and was encouraged by Morton Klass’s (2000) response. I experimented with an effort at Christian “positioned knowledge” (Priest 2001) and was cheered by the positive responses of some.

I have recently been heartened by anthropologists of Christianity (such as Joel Robbins) who have seen the value of a conversation with Christian theology and the value of utilizing New Testament Pauline concepts for social analysis and for creating a shared conversation with those who are Christians (see Robbins and Engelke 2010). Unfortunately, they have tended to structure the conversation as one between Christian theologians and secular anthropologists. By contrast, this paper would make Christian anthropologists central to the conversation.

But the issues are difficult. Most anthropologists who self-consciously identify as Christians will have developed protective strategies that avoid doing the very things called for in this paper. Anthropologists more broadly will rightly ask whether, and how, appropriate standards of anthropological

reasoning and evidence will be employed should anthropologists begin to more explicitly draw on and interact with theological concepts and understandings. But should a sufficient number of anthropologists grapple with the issues this article raises, I am hopeful that appropriate forms of engagement with the theological can be adjudicated to the betterment of anthropology as a discipline.

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### Joel Robbins

Department of Anthropology, University of California, San Diego, Social Sciences Building, Room 210, 9500 Gilman Drive, La Jolla, California 92093-0532, U.S.A. (jrobbins@weber.ucsd.edu). 13 V 13

This is a highly original article. As the authors note, conversations between theologians and “secular” anthropologists are rare. Here, the authors address anthropology without at all backgrounding their theological assumptions and show that this opens up new kinds of discussions. My response is framed as an anthropological turn of talk in such a discussion.

One kind of response would start with the flourishing Evangelical theological engagement with postmodern thought and with the critiques of liberalism and secularism that have appeared in its wake. It would note that this engagement provides a key foundation for this article and then go on to ask how the authors’ key intellectual claims may or may not be correlated with anthropological responses to this same set of issues. I do not have space to go too far down this track here, but I wanted to register my intuition that many anthropological critics of secularism and liberalism would not be ready to define the next step in their arguments as an openness to adopting a Christian view of the world or of the nature of humanity as the foundation for their own work. Does this mean they have not gone far enough in their critical work to develop a kind of openness they should in fact display? Or does it mean that from the anthropological side at least the dialogue between anthropology and theology is going to have to find slightly different grounds than those suggested in this article if it is going to be valuable for both sides? It occurs to me that recent arguments about the limits of anthropological engagements with the ontologies of the people anthropologists study are raising a similar set of questions on the anthropological side and that a consideration of some of this work could further stimulate this kind of discussion between anthropologists and theologians (see Goslinga 2012).

This initial observation in place, I want to raise two further issues for discussion. I raise them in a resolutely anthropological voice. This means that they will likely sound somewhat critical. But I do not mean them this way. My intent is rather to sharpen up some differences between theology as represented here and anthropology as at least I tend to think of it, in the hopes of pushing the dialogue further along. One issue is the extent to which in this article anthropology is reduced to ethnography. Or at least it is ethnography as an

openness to understanding others in their own terms that is what the authors define as good about anthropology—what makes anthropology worth having a dialogue with. It is, we are told, what anthropologists “do best with any human phenomenon” and is perhaps in some ways similar to a Christian “effort to love” others “as Christians.” It is promising that ethnography appears to be a bridge between the two disciplines in this way (see also Scharen and Vigen 2011). But from an anthropological point of view, this does seem to leave to one side anthropology’s long-running sense of itself as a theoretically productive discipline—one that attempts to formulate new ways of understanding human beings and their ways of living together. For many anthropologists, ignoring this part of the anthropological contribution—perhaps because “imposing theory” can “distort the ethnographic data”—might be too high a price to pay for entering into the proposed cross-disciplinary discussion.

Moreover, even as it largely disregards anthropological theory, it is in theoretical terms that this article most stands at a marked distance from anthropology. One of the article’s great virtues is that it clearly sets out a Christian theological anthropology (a Christian understanding of the nature of humanity). Anthropologists do not these days often set out an anthropological “anthropology” in this sense—but I would contend that their theories are always based on such views of the nature of humanity, and, although anthropological anthropologies are varied, they are in most cases quite distinct from the theological one presented here. Putting it bluntly, the authors’ theology sees the nature of human beings (and in particular the reality of evil in that nature) as the cause of the violent institutions people build or accept and the violent societies they create. Perhaps the most influential anthropological anthropology turns this around: arguing that institutions and societies decisively shape the human beings that live with them, including those aspects of human beings that may lead them to do evil. One of the great contributions of this article is that it suggests in just this way that an excellent starting point for discussion between theologians and anthropologists would be a consideration of their different fundamental anthropologies. Such a discussion, which this article initiates, is one from which both sides might well stand to learn a good deal about both themselves and each other.

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## Reply

We begin by thanking Joel Robbins for labeling our article “original” and Simon Coleman for remarking on our success in getting five people to work together. Glenn Hinson referred to our “bravery” in revealing our true positions, Omri Elisha wrote that “the stereotype that religiously committed people do not embrace intellectual challenges” was unfortunate, and David Lowry said that these are “exciting” times. All in all,

we feel that we have been treated with the kindness and good humor that we hope for in conversations such as these.

We also recognize that our article raised some serious objections, and we are appreciative that these were clearly laid out. If we have missed or misinterpreted any of these objections, the fault is our own. We will proceed by phrasing them as a series of questions. The questions are in logical order, by which we mean that if a question is not adequately answered, the subsequent questions become irrelevant. For the purpose of brevity, and with an apology for any unintended rudeness, we will refer to our respondents by last name.

1. *Does the anthropological discourse really preclude religiously committed scholars from voicing their full opinion?* We believe it does. Priest’s response describes the circumstance, including the bifurcation of academic life into frontstage versus backstage intellectual work, the self-censoring participation in the anthropological discourse, and the effort to write in ways that are “uncontaminated by religion.” In conversations among Christian anthropologists, stories like Priest’s are common, including the sense of liberation when speaking to seminarian or nonacademic audiences. Howell, who has written an article on the subject (2007), identifies here the discomfort in anthropology with religious language and cites Cannell’s labeling of Christians as “anthropology’s theoretical repressed.”

Elisha asks about the exact nature of the constraint. We respond that it is the usual constraint created by the privileged beliefs of any discourse. Those who hold them have difficulty seeing them; those who do not share them must smuggle in beliefs deemed incompatible with the privileged ones. Smuggling is typically done by translating the terms: “the supernatural” for “God,” or “nature” for “creation,” and so on. It is the manner in which Evans-Pritchard, Turner, Douglas, and others influenced by Christianity have been able to present their thinking. But, of course, the terms are not real equivalents, and smuggling ideas deprives scholars of the value of original sources and contexts. Since the vast majority of the world has resisted disenchantment in the Weberian sense, they too must smuggle in their true thoughts when becoming Western educated. Ironically, it is Christians from the global South who, as objects of study in the anthropology of Christianity, have indirectly opened the door to this conversation.

2. *Is expressed religious commitment compatible with the scientific task, which is to lay aside biases in order to discover the truth?* The thrust of our argument is that all epistemologies assert exclusive truth claims. Faith-based assumptions and grand narratives exist for secularism as well. In fact, we believe that such commitments are foundational to rational thought and can provide rich contexts for understanding. Still, what we are proposing is not the assimilation of Christianity as a whole into the scientific discourse, but the consideration of religiously based insights that might be of use to anthropology.

On a related matter, Giri charges religion with contributing to oppression and violence. We certainly regret the participation of Christians in colonialism and consider that partic-

ipation to have been a form of religious syncretism parallel to the contemporary syncretism with American patriotism. Still, we suggest that a more careful reading of colonial history will reveal story after story of Christians, both indigenous and expatriate, offering compassion, insisting on justice, and providing real service to others. We believe that in a world where people hold deeply religious beliefs, and these religious beliefs are foundational to their understanding of meaning, purpose, and to driving their actions along normative lines, claims to exclusive truth do not have to be, and should not be, a barrier to fruitful building of conversation and community. In fact, fruitful dialogue on action occurs commonly (and rarely makes the news). Four of us teach in a development program where examples of interreligious cooperation abound, and where the true difficulty is the hegemony of the scientific perspective, which denies the relevance of people's ethical moorings and teleological goals.

3. *Is not secularism both necessary and sufficient to the scientific task?* Coleman suggests that anthropology's vision has been "enabled and not merely constrained" by secularism. This is no doubt the case. The secular perspective has contributed much to a knowledge of the practical workings of the cosmos and to an understanding of our place in it. But it has also at times operated with a mechanistic model, viewing the world as a resource and the human person as just a consumer of those resources (consider Leslie White). Coleman suggests that there is "a practical, ethical dimension involved in demonstrating [that] . . . we are just another species." He does not say what this ethic might be. But assuming that it is based on a reduction of human hubris, we would suggest that, while such a reduction is necessary to becoming considerate of other species, an identification of humanity's special role of responsibility in creation is even more necessary to motivating people to work toward protecting the integrity of cultures and the earth while enabling them to flourish.

The religiously committed other brings nuanced conceptual tools, refined through long use, reflection, and experience that are different from the secular ones. What is that difference? Most anthropologists would say the difference lies in the credence, or lack thereof, given to the existence of the "supernatural." We are uncomfortable with this term, as it is a residual category produced by the Enlightenment. As Christians, we would, for instance, distinguish sharply between God, who is Creator, and the human soul, which is created. We suggest rather that the difference lies in the credence given to a world of reality and meaning beyond the observable, which is capable of providing powerful explanations of the human condition and helpful solutions to abiding human problems. It is a matter of taking seriously the alternate conceptions of reality that human beings hold.

4. *Is there not too much diversity in Christianity, or any other religion, to allow for a meaningful conversation between science and religion?* The most obvious response here is to cite the diversity in science as an analogy: diversity in and of itself is

not a barrier, what matters is whether people are listening carefully to the evidence and the arguments from all sides. Still, we acknowledge, and some of us are trained in, the diversity of thought in our own religion, and we recommend simply judging the arguments on their merits.

For us, the more interesting difference is the one between theology and the lived experience of Christianity. In general, we do see theology as a "contentious translation of . . . true, living faith" (Coleman). Perhaps the same is true for anthropological theory and its relation to the lived experience it describes. In any case, we propose that theology is a deep grammar of Christian thought and experience, and that theologians are grammarians of the "language" of practicing Christians (Schreier 1985). This means that what theologians will have to offer to the anthropological discourse is insights from lived experience articulated in academic terms, a process parallel to anthropologists offering theory that emerges from ethnography.

What about the other religions? Here we must walk a fine line. We would hardly be committed members of our own religion if we thought the content of belief did not matter. Furthermore, attempting to speak for all religions would certainly be essentializing (cf. Lindbeck). Surely our readers would agree that while they welcome all anthropological theories at the table, they do not agree with every one on every point. Likewise, we welcome all religiously committed scholars to speak freely, and certainly intend to listen carefully, but we will disagree heartily when not persuaded of their arguments and expect them to do the same with us.

5. *What real benefit would religiously based thought bring to anthropological theorizing?* Robbins suggests that we have reduced anthropology to ethnography. That was certainly not our intention. If theology does not have something to offer to anthropological theory, our argument is moot, though theory and method are interrelated. Elisha and Haynes both refer to recent conversations on theology's role in the genealogy of anthropology, including the unexamined use of Christian categories in anthropology's construction of religion as an analytical concept, a seemingly negative example. Thus, Elisha asks, "Precisely, how would the work we do be improved by broadening our epistemology in this way?"

We respond, first, that anthropologists would be epistemologically positioned to better hear other voices if they heard those voices in their midst. Until recently, anthropologists have had the luxury of engaging in a conversation outside the hearing of their informants. This private conversation has encouraged the development of privileged beliefs embedded in theorizing. As a partial remedy, we welcome the recent development of inviting informants to become consultants, keeping theory more carefully grounded in informants' views of truth.

Second, we suggest that theology as an academic discipline has much to say on topics important to anthropology. As Robbins notes, few anthropologists have stated clearly their views on the nature of humanity—or the reason for the ex-

istence of the universe, or a multitude of other questions that theology addresses. In the article, we present the example of violence to demonstrate the value added. Robbins and Giri both defend the idea that evil is rooted in human institutions. We agree; good theology sees both people and institutions as causal (cf. Wink [1984] on “principalities and powers”). But, as a total explanation, just blaming institutions has all the problems of grounding the “superorganic.” Are people merely misguided when they invent institutions such as slavery? If such institutions are natural products of cultures, on what account do we criticize them? By itself, anthropology’s approach lacks explanatory power and solutions, both of which can be provided by theology(ies).

6. *How would ethnography be affected if ethnographers did not bracket out their own religious commitments?* Hinson notes that consultants are more willing to take conversations to deep places when they know the ethnographer shares their beliefs and will represent them as true. He asks whether the same covenant of trust can be established if ethnographers hold different beliefs, or pretend not to hold any. We certainly agree with Hinson that objectivity is an illusion, “an act of deception that fundamentally undermines trust-building.” Yet it seems that ethnographers sharing their own beliefs would be trying to listen while delivering a message at the same time (perhaps anthropologists’ strongest complaint against missionaries).

First, anthropologists also deliver messages, even when they are listening carefully to their informants; no one comes to the field without delivering a message. We are encouraged by Hinson’s suggestion that such messages “might well unfold as humble and compassionate engagement.” But, second, we recognize that in ethnography, our consultants are the primary witnesses, and we must listen. This is not to the exclusion of being honest about what we believe. In fact, it is generally easier to encourage conversation by disagreeing politely than by remaining silent and letting others imagine the worst. No doubt there will be some loss when beliefs are not shared. Thus, we recommend that, rather than bracketing them out as biased, special credence be given to ethnographers of their own religious communities such as Talal Asad or Dipesh Chakrabarty.

Peacock distinguishes between beholding and believing. He cites Gadamer’s establishment of method as a form of truth, in which “the shared experience of believer and beholder, as one beholds belief, is itself a ‘truth’ that goes beyond specific ‘beliefs’ of either believer or beholder.” This epistemological model, he says, can be “a basis for fieldwork as well as for other encounters.” If so, the question follows, how is this new truth to be conveyed to those who were not party to the original encounter? We remember Geertz’s point that ethnography is actually in the writing. Here we thank Robbins for pointing us to Goslinga’s very helpful article (2012) on the responsibility of anthropologists to risk opening themselves up to the ontologies of others in order to represent them fairly.

7. *Is an epistemology of witness adequate to the task of providing a grounding for the dialogue between anthropologists and theologians?* Yes. Giri suggests that there might be a transcendent form of spirituality (not rationality) that would provide a “permanent process of critique, creativity, and transformations,” but we do not see how this claim is any more valid than the claim to transcendent objectivity. We believe deeply that the only solution is for everyone to speak from their own “positioned intellectual . . . traditions” (Howell). This is, after all, what we do daily in the classroom as “professors” of the truth.

Elisha asks whether our position is in fact a postmodern one. We distinguish, as do other scholars, between moderate and extreme forms of postmodernism, and we identify with the former, not the latter. Both types claim, as Elisha suggests, that truth is “discursively constructed from the start,” but the latter reduces all truth to its constructions, while the former does not. Elisha seems to agree that the alternative to naive realism is not an absolute constructivism when he suggests that “this is not a denial of empirical reality.” We agree with him that our findings “are intrinsically fluid and contingent,” based not only on the limits of our own understanding but also on the changing nature of social reality. Hence we have cited various contemporary philosophers to reflect upon a postcritical form of knowledge that recognizes limits (Gadamer’s “horizons”) while still providing hope (Polanyi’s “universal intent”).

Elisha counterposes witness to storytelling, the difference being that storytelling does not presume a divine metanarrative. We suggest that all stories are a type of witness to truth, with or without a divine metanarrative. A number of our respondents have told stories here to illustrate their points. In the same way, we believe that stories illustrate points whenever they are told (ethnography) or retold (theory). They are perhaps the quintessential form of witness because they convey truth in context, rather than through abstracted argument. Robbins asks how the conversation will proceed when there is deep disagreement on fundamental points. Our suggestion, in all seriousness, is that we must proceed through the telling of stories.

8. *What would happen to disciplinary boundaries if theological thinking were to be used as a critical tool in anthropology?* Elisha suggests that the disciplines will be more productive if they remain distinct. Priest acknowledges the need for “appropriate standards of anthropological reasoning and evidence.” Yet Robbins offers Goslinga’s article, which encourages pushing “the limits of anthropological engagements with the ontologies of the people anthropologists study” (Robbins).

Howell cites Lambek’s interesting proposal that religion and science are “incommensurable and hence co-present, rather than binary and mutually exclusive” (Lambek 2012:4). That is, anthropology and theology are incommensurable (cannot be compared to determine their relative accuracy) but not incompatible (unable to be held at once). Lambek further suggests that the boundary might be viewed as a Lévi-Straus-

sian binary opposition, with each side constructing the other as part of a larger discourse. He concludes that while anthropology has necessarily been “complicit in formulating and reproducing” the boundary (1), “insofar as religion and the secular are not discrete objects they need not be mutually exclusive” (7).

If we adopt this notion, what is the distinguishing feature between them? It is that anthropology appeals to ethnography as a scientific method for evidence, while theology also appeals to God’s intentional revelation through nature and through history as recorded in scripture. Regarding theology’s faith in revelation, we note two confusions: (1) that theology is lacking in the ability to be skeptical and (2) that it claims to speak for God. To these we respond first that there is no lack of skepticism in theological debates, and second that theology understands itself to be a human reflection about God’s revelation, not revelation itself. To the degree that God and revelation exist, that “evidence” is available to all who are willing to examine it without prejudice.

Still, we do not propose the elimination of the boundary between anthropology and theology. We simply make the more limited claim that anybody who thinks theologically, whether Christian or not, just as anybody who thinks scientifically, whether religious or not, can provide insights and advance theory if permitted to speak fully and freely. We are asking anthropology to posture itself to learn from and with the other, including the faith traditions.

9. *Are there really moral/instrumental implications to anthropology’s work, and if so, what responsibility does anthropology have to its public?* Haynes cites Robbins’s call for anthropologists to learn from theologians that the point is not merely to interpret the world, but to change it. It is applied anthropology that has wrestled with this question the most directly, operating with an implicit understanding that human well-being is intrinsically valuable. But anthropology’s commitment to moral relativism has complicated the conversation on ethics and limited its political impact to the sometimes blind defense of cultures. Thus, as Priest notes from his own experience, “an explicitly secular voice limits the public influence of anthropology among those who are religious.”

Whose ethic shall we choose? Howell tells the story of his students’ rejection of Scheper-Hughes’s appeal to a precultural ethic. “Moral epistemology requires . . . content, particularity, and specificity,” he says, a situation that theologians call “the scandal of particularity.” We believe that the circumstance is exactly the same for a generic morality as it is for disembodied truth. Without the context provided by a tradition, neither has the power to effect real change. Thus, we have proposed the ethic of love, imaged as Christ on the cross, out of the Christian tradition. We welcome alternate proposals from other traditions, including secularism, and expect the dialogue to be productive of richer solutions for the inclusion of religious thought in the debate.

Lowry identifies both love and healing as indicators of divine purpose for humanity. We are encouraged by the report

of his own work on repairing the webs of life. In our teaching about development, we also use holistic models that interweave material and spiritual dimensions of oppression and cultural brokenness. Haynes notes that we are attempting to revive the political possibilities of anthropology and suggests that we do it best with a certain posture, a “quality of . . . voice” and a “perspective . . . as religiously committed individuals,” rather than with a set of categories. We appreciate this insight and intend to act accordingly!

10. *If the argument here is persuasive, what are the next steps toward future conversations?* First, we express our true gratitude to *Current Anthropology* for their willingness to publish this conversation. Then, we hope to propose a AAA forum on the subject at some point in the future. Meanwhile, we are opening an MA in Theological and Cultural Anthropology at Eastern University in the fall of 2014, and we will be holding a national conference entitled “On Knowing Humanity” at Eastern in June of 2015. All are welcome.

—Eloise Meneses, Lindy Backues, David Bronkema, Eric Flett, and Benjamin L. Hartley

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