

Anthropologists Engage Theology: A Constructive Contextual Theological Critique

Jim Harries

*Founder and Chair, Alliance for Vulnerable Mission
Rural Kenya*

Criticism has been directed at anthropologists for their perceived and shared assumption that God and Christian theology are irrelevant to their field. However, this perspective is shifting. I propose that anthropologists should acknowledge this shift of perspective and seek to engage with theologians. It is important to inform theologians about these developments. My argument draws on an open-access article¹ examining the compatibility between theology and anthropology, particularly in relation to engagement with various “world religions.”

Today’s anthropology originated in a gradual move away from its foundation in the desire of Christian missionaries to understand the people they are reaching and become a secular university discipline. Anthropologists’ adherence to Marxist thinking in their discipline post-World War II has made it particularly difficult for research-oriented Christian missionaries to cooperate with secular anthropologists.² The disdain some anthropologists have shown toward the words of Jesus and the practices of his followers has arguably tarnished their reputation for impartiality.³

Anthropology is considered by many to be a complement to sociology. Whereas sociology is the study of one’s own people, anthropologists set out to explore other people, those of other cultures and ethnicities. Anthropologists are especially well known for their research on what are considered primitive people’s customs and traditions. Classically, anthropologists study the religions of primitive people from a non-religious perspective. They tend to explain away what is religious. Thus, according to Mair,⁴ they articulate what people understand themselves as doing through religious motivation on a Marxist basis. To use Mair’s own words, on the basis of “the reality of power, greed, and exploitation.”⁵

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Many anthropologists, Beidelman⁶ being a well-known case in point, have despised the work of Christian missionaries. However, not all anthropologists have been of this ilk. According to Larsen,⁷ some, such as Turner, Douglas, and Evans-Pritchard, have been active Christians themselves.

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Studying Christianity has pushed anthropologists toward the realization that many of their own foundations clearly emerged from the church. This has confronted anthropology’s traditional *outward looking gaze*. Instead of considering themselves to be standing on a firm platform from which to evaluate everyone else, as if others are set out in a panorama in front of them,⁸ anthropologists have more recently been required to be reflective and consider aspects of their own identity and origins. This has forced them to rethink anthropology’s foundation that draws on secularism. They have had to ask whether their secular foundations have been as

1. J. Havea et al., “Dialogues: Anthropology and Theology,” in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 28 (2022): 297–347.

2. Patrick Harries and David Maxwell, “Introduction: The Spiritual in the Secular,” in *The Spiritual in the Secular: Missionaries and Knowledge about Africa*, eds. Patrick Harries and David Maxwell (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 24.

3. Cf. Timothy Larsen, *The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

4. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 297–347.

5. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 314.

6. T.O. Beidelman, *Colonial Evangelism: A Socio-historical Study of an East African Mission at the Grass Roots* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

7. Larsen, *The Slain God*.

8. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 304.

firm as they would have liked. Increasingly, anthropologists have had to realize that the building blocks used to build the discipline of anthropology have a great deal of overlap with those used by the church and the underlying the gospel of Jesus.

The argument I want to consider in detail arose from a set of discussions focusing on what it means to be “theological” in world religions. Part of the reason this should be of interest to readers is one author’s acknowledgement that doing theology of other religions means examining those religions not from a secular perspective by giving a panoramic view⁹ from a platform of “functional atheism”¹⁰ but from a platform that is, according to Lamb, Abrahamic in origin.¹¹ That means examining non-Christian ways of life using the tools of theology is in some ways inseparable from examining them in the light of Christ. Some theologians may balk at this. It may sound incredibly liberal. In some ways they may be right.

In another sense, however, anthropology’s attention to the work of God in the church is bringing us back to a key part of what should be the work of the church. The very term *anthropology* originating in Greek, tells us something of its origins in theological discussion. For Christian theologians, a necessary complement to trying to understand God (theology), must be to understand humanity (anthropology). There are many reasons for this. One reason is that our understanding of God always builds on who we ourselves as people (i.e., *anthropos*) are (i.e. anthropomorphic). In a sense, anthropology’s becoming “secular” constituted the church losing a part of its theology. Anthropology coming back to study the church (the Gospel, theology, and so forth) is thus a kind of home-coming.

Some anthropologists are not afraid of being outspoken. We must remember that the discipline of anthropology, as most efforts at human cooperation, itself produces much disagreement and disputation. Theologians are no exception and also have their disagreements. But if anthropologists want to go back to study the church, that presents an amazing opportunity for the church to recover ways of thinking, through research and exploration, from which anthropologists once deprived them. This can result in Christian renewal, and especially in renewal of ways in which the foreign mission of the church can be engaged.

What follows is a theologically informed and critical engagement with the referenced article.¹² Criticism is rooted in an appreciation for the distance to which anthropology has transformed itself, so as to avoid epistemological forms and arguments that are now seen as weak, (i.e., not original).

Preamble

Apparently commissioned by the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, this article¹³ throws light on the tension between

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the discourse of theology versus anthropology through texts transcribed from live discussions held by those in these professions in 2021. “Religions” considered include Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity.¹⁴ The article represents the views of anthropologists stepping back from their discipline’s traditional “vast alienation from theology”¹⁵ in a notable act of humility.

Anthropologist participants are to be commended for confessing rarely revealed, even surreptitious, aspects of their discipline and practice. Their listening to theologians exposes a pretentiousness that underlies their discipline’s claim to objectivity, which is still maintained by many to date.¹⁶

Serious theoretical problems left unaddressed yet profoundly influential include:

1. The use of English language throughout—with one clear exception¹⁷—results in the study of “others” to be compromised to some degree by the use of English categories to describe the culture of the “others.” Non-Western participant interlocutor’s practice of speaking in English into a context in which they are in some ways outsiders, ignores difficulties involved in inserting foreign content into crowded semantic fields.¹⁸
2. Many contributors were surely nervous with the critique of academia’s foundations, which approximates to chopping at the branch on which contemporary scholars sit.

Bearing in mind the financial support that anthropology in particular and academia in general generates, participants who are not Western anthropologists appear forced to dance around subjects, endeavoring to reveal what they can in fraught and contested conceptual and cultural arenas from which there has been much

9. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 304.

10. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 307.

11. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 326.

12. Havea et al., “Dialogues.”

13. Havea et al., “Dialogues.”

14. I place “religion” in scare quotes due to the difficulty I have accepting the legitimacy of this category.

15. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 334.

16. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 326.

17. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 341–342.

18. George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 314.

estrangement. The debates presented should, in my view, have been held primarily using the indigenous languages of the people being studied, and with non-scholars (i.e., those not needing to maintain academic credibility).¹⁹ That “confessions” arise in contexts that twist anthropology’s ground rules—one of which is to engage people in their own languages and categories—is a strange irony.

The Christian basis of the practice of confession that constitutes this article implicitly demonstrates the deep roots of belief in the Bible held by the contributors. That it was published in a mainstream journal shows that secular anthropology shares the same roots. This commendable reliance on biblical authority can hardly have been missed by those involved.

My naming the weaknesses underlying this article should be taken as an effort to strengthen its case rather than a critique of its purpose. I understand myself as adding evidence to the article’s demonstration of faults in the way dualistic anthropological researchers approach holistic human communities.

Critique of language use

Many language and translation issues in this article are ignored. For example:

- We are told that Islam is premised on a “realist ontology,”²⁰ when we should have been told that Western interpretations of what is called Islam ascribe to it a realist ontology.
- Rasayanagam suggests that giving students a more focused reading will help them, as if non-Western students’ reading more widely will itself remove them from the “binds” of their people’s presuppositions.²¹
- Al-Azem presumes Sufis to be responding to a “natural world,” whereas Sufism originated from and largely thrives in places that do not acknowledge the Western-English category of “nature.”²²

When the issue of language is taken seriously through careful consideration of how the Arabic term *din* is used,²³ significant implications are acknowledged. “Religion as a modern category cannot possibly do translational justice to *din*.”²⁴ This raises a question about every other term in use. The presupposition made by Moosa, who introduces the term *din*,²⁵ seems to indicate that it is singularly pivotal. While *din* may be a particularly key concept, inter-cultural translation is extremely vulnerable to translation vagaries of many, perhaps endless, terms.

The nature of confessions

The fact that anthropologists undoubtedly disagree with one

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another, and that some may dispute the “confessions” made in this article, does not disqualify the value of what is presented. We learn that anthropologists may set out to interpret what they find through a Marxist screen—that is, “the reality of power, greed, and exploitation”—“beyond what local people tell us,” (i.e., as necessary overriding local people’s explanations).²⁶ Anthropologist perceptions of reality (as with academia in general), unlike that of Buddhists, must be consistent,²⁷ even if or when consistency makes no sense or might be disruptive to human thriving.²⁸

Few anthropologists can helpfully contribute to intercultural ethics.²⁹ An anthropologist may refuse to be open about how they interpret local people’s behavior in a way that denies them opportunity to articulate why they say and do what they do.³⁰ Academics often presuppose aspects of paradigms from Abrahamic religions without ever making such presuppositions apparent.³¹ While the term “theology” is applied to non-Christian “religions,” it is inherently Christian in form.³² This means, for example, that even Hindu theology is defined through thought molded with reference to Christianity.³³

Lamb tells us that anthropologists need to be more honest, and more personally invested, in what and how they research, especially exploring and articulating their “inner spiritual essence.”³⁴ Theology opens doors to avenues of understanding, whereas academics (i.e., anthropologists) cannot be trusted not to distort people’s beliefs.³⁵ Furani asks to what extent anthropological endeavors are a continuation of prayer, presumably as practiced by their Christian forbears.³⁶ This takes into account that anthropology emerged from the church, and that many early anthropologists either were themselves Christians/Christian missionaries or interacted closely with them. Sivakumar reveals that anthropologists can “help” (financially) the people they are researching, without revealing that

19. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 325.

20. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 305.

21. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 307.

22. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 311.

23. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 340–341.

24. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 341.

25. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 341.

26. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 314–315.

27. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 317.

28. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 318.

29. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 318.

30. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 325.

31. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 326.

32. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 327.

33. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 327.

34. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 327.

35. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 330.

36. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 328, 336.

they are doing so in their writing.³⁷ This raises questions whether by this means they are encouraging people to tell them what they think they want to hear, or to invent stories in the hope of getting further assistance.

The aversion of anthropologists to “religion” results in their minimizing what anthropology has to offer. Theological thinking was not overcome by anthropological thinking. It was simply “banished.”³⁸ This raises a major question: What does the content of anthropological writing represent, if anthropology banishes rather than addresses areas of knowledge important to humankind?

Didactic practices

While his anthropological training enabled Rasayanagam to be adaptive and flexible to “listen” while in the field, he conceded that he continued to teach (for a long time unknowingly) from a much more familiar philosophical foundation, that belongs to Western academia. While in the field he was exposed to “physical discomfort, vulnerability ... anger ... anxiety.”³⁹ This was no longer the case when he stood in front of a class. He explains how this represents an appropriation of the complexity and sometimes painful or confusing nature of field experience into a single view, in which other religions and cultures were lined up in a kind of panorama, for the purposes of teaching.⁴⁰ He perceived this as a problem when students complained that he was doing exactly the kinds of things that he, as an anthropologist, was teaching people not to do in the field. In his classroom he approached contexts from a culturally monolithic perspective.

Insights given to us by Rasayanagam reflect struggles I have often experienced myself, a theologian/missionary, who has invested in anthropology. On returning to the UK, I am often asked to enlighten people about life in East Africa. I then have the choice either to present my listeners with raw information about ways of life radically different from their own, or to conceal things that may be too upsetting, striking, or controversial. When in the West, I find myself under pressure to avoid too much controversy. As a result, I find myself, even after as little as a month or two away from the field, re-imagining Africa in a way that is much more compliant to what the UK wants to believe instead of the reality on the ground.

Many anthropologists spend far longer in the West reflecting on prior experience than they do being vulnerably exposed to exotic cultures. I consider a “vulnerable” exposure to be one mediated by an indigenous language and where an anthropologist does not offer material incentives for people to agree with them. This lack of vulnerability renders it especially likely that students are fed with domesticated diets, insofar as translation can easily render the exotic familiar, instead of being “raw responses” to other people’s ways of life. This means that students of anthropology in

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the West are not given information that they can freely re-interpret, but instead insights are presented in such a way as to support a particular epistemic path of interpretation. This is “prejudice” writ large. Students are told the answers to the questions that anthropologists invent.

Critique of practice

Anthropologists, being human, must make value judgments about what they observe, whether intended or not. For the sake of honesty, it would be important to make one’s valuations overt. I suspect that many anthropologists conceal impacts of their own value judgments on their reporting for the sake of a supposed neutrality.

One case brought by Haynes involves her response to Zambian Pentecostal pastors’ adherence to the prosperity Gospel and healing by “magic.”⁴¹ (The use of the term “magic” implies a dualistic understanding that I do not take to be common, or even present, among African people.) Haynes claims that the adherence to what she terms “magic” contributes to their “ignoring the social structures that have created the conditions of deprivation that plague the contemporary post colony.”⁴² Haynes adds that it is hard to find “ways to critique the structures that ethnography reveals in terms that are meaningful to those they study.”⁴³

While Haynes does not challenge indigenous people regarding the prosperity Gospel, she does contribute to debates about it in Western English. This constitutes use of privileged knowledge

37. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 331.

38. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 335.

39. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 310.

40. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 304.

41. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 322.

42. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 322.

43. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 324.

to talk about people “behind their backs” in a way they do not understand. While talking behind people’s backs in this way is not always wrong, it should be done responsibly. To do it responsibly may require ongoing, rather than episodic exposure to indigenous debate. Yet anthropologists typically spend many years developing their thoughts following a relatively brief time in the field.

I find Lamb’s insight enlightening, specifically in terms of the concept of “belief.” His concern is not whether he “believes” in spirits, as apparently does a family he seeks to help.⁴⁴ He is concerned, rather, to help the family by responding to the nature of their faith.⁴⁵ I draw attention to this question of belief from my own position as a Christian believer. As a Christian, I believe there is truth, and that truth should be promoted and upheld. This opens a space for criticism of practice. This is—although not often overtly acknowledged—the space that much anthropology occupies, given its history in Christianity. In other words, the critique that is leveled by a Christian theologian is rooted in a notion of truth that goes beyond inter-human subjectivity. This raises the question about how anthropologists, who have appropriated such an orientation to criticism, can then reject the Scriptures. I encourage anthropologists to: 1) Understand the theological foundation for the critical position they take, and 2) Look out for excessive bias that can arise from a secular orientation, including its tendency to construct theory with too much detachment from the field as the source of the original insights.

Conclusion

Exposing some of anthropology’s faulty assumptions can appear to take the discipline of anthropology either a step closer to its demise or to its radical transformation. I believe transformation is more desirable, so am extremely grateful for the honesty of the authors of the article “Dialogues: Anthropology and Theology,” from the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. Anthropology should stop “bracketing off”⁴⁶ aspects of the life of the *anthropos* (humans) that they do not like. Religion, suggests Rasayanagam, is not something from which anthropology should distance itself.⁴⁷ To reduce religions to aspects of human living that can be presented in

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a panorama in front of the researcher in effect allows the researcher to found a new “religion,” something that anthropology with its pretensions to objectivity is ill equipped to do. There is no set of epistemological turtles “all the way down.”⁴⁸

All human truth is rooted in “religion” of some sort. Anthropology itself is “also and always an exercise in metaphysics,” as Evens claims.⁴⁹ Decisions must be made about one’s own theological foundations before anything else can happen.⁵⁰ Anthropology borrowed those foundations from Christianity, then deceived itself by concealing that origin. Christ’s message does not represent a set of religions. I find Masuzawa’s⁵¹ extended historical study of this theme particularly helpful. “Religion” is about God communicating with humanity—whether Islamic, Buddhist, or Christian—in a way that brings life. Secularism’s acquisition of a universalist-panoramic vista is an illegitimate usurpation of what rightly belongs to God and to Christ. Historically, Christianity in Europe long was taken as the hegemonic foundation on which other “knowledge” could be grafted—a position that secularism has been endeavoring to usurp in ways that are illegitimate.

In my understanding, there has been a tendency for theologians to distance themselves from a lot of anthropological research. I hope that this article will encourage them to boldly engage with it.

48. Emma Oulton, “What Does ‘Turtles All the Way Down’ Mean?” Bustle, June 22, 2017, <https://www.bustle.com/p/what-does-turtles-all-the-way-down-mean-john-greens-book-title-is-old-philosophical-joke-66138/>.

49. T.M.S. (Terry) Evens, *Anthropology as Ethics: Nondualism and the Conduct of Sacrifice* (Oxford: Berghan Books), 418.

50. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 339.

51. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (London: University of Chicago Press).

44. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 331.

45. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 331.

46. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 306.

47. Havea et al., “Dialogues,” 304.