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Anthropology, theology, and history in conversation

- Introduction: conversations between theology, anthropology, and history** 1
Jeanette Mathews and Matt Tomlinson
- Theology, anthropology, and the invocation to be otherwise** 9
Philip Fountain, Doug Hynd, and Tobias Tan
- Screening anthropology and theology in *Ten Canoes*** 21
Katherine Rainger
- Mimetic theory, anthropology, and theology:
on the distinctive method of René Girard** 41
Scott Cowdell
- Coconuts and *Fautasi*: in search of a Pacific Theology** 58
Kambati Uriam and Helen Gardner
- An [is]land of milk, honey, and taro** 78
Anthony Rees
- The prosperity gospel in anthropology and theology: the case of fast money
schemes in Papua New Guinea** 87
John Cox
- Interdisciplinary engagement: the contextuality
of two "indigenous" Christians in Taiwan** 100
Ying-Cheng Chang
- An afterword: conversations among theology, anthropology, and history** 114
J. Derrick Lemons

Book reviews

- Faith in the public square** 125
- A biography of God** 127
- Liberation Theology and Palestine** 130
- The Europeans in Australia** 134

Introduction: conversations between theology, anthropology, and history

Jeanette Mathews and Matt Tomlinson

The articles in this issue come from an ongoing conversation among scholars who have connections to Canberra and work in theology, anthropology, and history. We have all felt that these disciplines are especially fruitful ones for interdisciplinary work, and hope that the contributions to this issue suggest some lines of intersection and paths in new directions.

In July 2016, many of us met to discuss selected chapters from an edited volume being prepared by the anthropologist Derrick Lemons on “Theologically Engaged Anthropology”. Lemons had received a Templeton Foundation grant to hold workshops on this topic in Atlanta, Georgia, USA and Cambridge, UK. He came to Canberra (and also Sydney and Wellington) to discuss the project and hear our comments on the chapters, as well as to show a short documentary film he was making as part of the project and hear our feedback on it. In November 2017, many of the members of the first group met again, along with several new participants, to present original papers which engage with the question of how theologians, anthropologists, and historians might best engage with each other’s work.

In planning for this issue, authors were not given any programmatic line to follow. The venture was intended to be an exploration, not a destination. What, we asked, might theology, anthropology, and history learn from each other that they cannot learn within their own disciplines? If interdisciplinary conversation takes place, what are the issues on which it might

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be most productive? What, too, are the limitations of interdisciplinarity? That is, in seeking to engage with each other, what possibilities might we unintentionally be closing off?

The contributors to this issue respond to these questions in various ways. Before summarising them, two points need to be made concerning issues we expect many readers to have in mind, and which have echoed through our conversations up to this point.

The first is that conversations among these disciplines are not new, although they should be continually refreshed. To look only at recent history, mid-twentieth-century theologians and missiologists such as H. Richard Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Eugene Nida took culture seriously as a topic of Christian reflection, drawing on their era's anthropological understandings of culture as structures of value that are transmitted across generations. Niebuhr offered a useful and widely cited typology of relationships between Christ and culture, drawing especially on the work of Bronislaw Malinowski and Ruth Benedict for his understanding of culture.¹ Tillich characterized religion as "ultimate concern", arguing that religion "is the meaning-giving substance of culture, and culture is the totality of forms in which the basic concern of religion expresses itself."² Tillich's work harmonised notably well with Clifford Geertz's influential anthropological definition of religion as a system of symbols addressing human existence's great problems of meaning.³ Nida, a linguist and scholar of missions, wrote about how missionaries should understand and engage with different cultures. He devised a model of translation known as "dynamic equivalence", which aims at "putting idioms and events in local terms, rather than bringing the receptor community to the translation by changing the receptor community through education or Westernisation."⁴ Nida's *Customs and Cultures* (1954)⁵ is full of tales, many of them humorous and all of them cautionary, making the argument that missionaries ought to avoid ethnocentric assumptions and make use of local categories, values, and practices in their work. For Niebuhr, Tillich, and Nida, then, effective theology and mission demands close attention to cultural contexts.

These ideas have been extended and developed by contextual theologians, who identify cultural context and personal experience as the grounds for understanding God.⁶ In contextual theology, the traditional concerns of anthropological and historical scholarship come to the forefront as matters of pressing theological interest. To understand God's plan for Samoa, a

contextual theologian might argue, one might need to hear God speaking Samoan; to understand the life of the church in Samoa, one would need to understand the history of missionary engagements, local uptake, and ongoing transformation that have always involved competing social values. The most exciting work in contextual theology is strongly interdisciplinary, gaining its vitality and critical edge by bringing theology, anthropology, and history together in transformative ways.⁷

Coming from another direction, several notable twentieth-century anthropologists, including E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Mary Douglas, developed their analyses by using theology as a finely and differently balanced tool.⁸ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, who converted to Catholicism, drew on theological categories and comparative biblical references to understand East African religions, and famously summed up Nuer Religion with the remarkable lines: “Nuer religion is ultimately an interior state. This state is externalized in rites which we can observe, but their meaning depends finally on an awareness of God”—note, “awareness,” not belief, and certainly not a mistaken belief, as earlier theorists of religion like Tylor and Frazer had seen it—“and that men are dependent on him and must be resigned to his will. At this point the theologian takes over from the anthropologist.”⁹ Mary Douglas, a lifelong Catholic, revealed her early interest in theology when she wrote her renowned analysis of Levitical taboos, but later in her career she turned to a full-on engagement with biblical studies that caused her to revise her earlier work in many ways. Victor Turner converted to Catholicism with his wife Edith (who would later follow twisty spiritual paths indeed), and “biblical and theological themes pulse through his writings from his conversion right to his death.”¹⁰ Reviewing this history, Timothy Larsen writes convincingly that “theology not only has been but continues to be a conversation partner for anthropology.”¹¹ Granted that mid-twentieth-century British social anthropologists tended not to focus on “culture” the way Americans did, one can still argue that, for a long time, anthropology has not been nearly as secular in theory or practice as it has sometimes been portrayed.

The second point is that conversations between disciplines can be “awkward”—but also, perhaps, productive in their awkwardness, as argued recently by Joel Robbins and others.¹² Interactions might be understood as encounters or engagements (per Fountain and Lau 2013)¹³ or, as Derrick Lemons puts it in his afterword to this issue, as stratified, transformational, or confrontational—or as something else again. The purpose of conversation

might be to reconcile or bring together, but it could just as easily be to clarify differences and illuminate different paths, always in the light of a larger vision of why “our” kind of scholarship should matter beyond its narrow academic confines. In proposing new dialogues among theology, anthropology, and history, then, we neither presuppose their value nor assume a specific kind of productivity. Yet, as the essays to follow show, we all think it is worth making an attempt, however provisional.

Between this Introduction and the Afterword by Derrick Lemons, there are seven contributions. The first comes from Philip Fountain, Douglas Hynd, and Tobias Tan, who begin by observing that theology is sometimes counterposed to anthropology, with the former characterised as leaning toward normativity—explaining how things ought to be, offering “an invocation to be otherwise”—and the latter leaning toward description, diving into the details of everyday practice. Fountain, Hynd, and Tan critique this neat division, arguing that the disciplines have “both normative and descriptive impulses, and these are never entirely disentangled.” Earlier generations of anthropologists famously offered normative visions of better ways of life, whether admiring supposedly anxiety-free Samoan adolescents or lauding hunter-gatherers as wealthy in the ways they want to be wealthy; and some theologians have insisted that theologians ought to engage with ethnography, and even conduct ethnographic fieldwork themselves, in order to understand the life of religion as actually lived.¹⁴ Fountain, Hynd, and Tan suggest that normativity and description are always co-present, and although it might be necessary to choose to foreground one and background the other in a particular scholarly context, an appreciation of the contrast between the two tendencies can both widen and sharpen our scholarly visions.

The next contribution, from Katherine Rainger, uses the cinematic space of Rolf de Heer’s film *Ten Canoes* as an opportunity for an encounter between Theology and Anthropology. After describing how the filmmaker drew on the work of historical photographer Donald Thomson as inspiration for the film’s narrative of Yolngu culture, the photographer’s own relationship with the Indigenous community was held up as an exemplary anthropological project during a time fraught with colonial violence. Thomson was able to capture and preserve the traditional way of life of the Yolngu peoples represented in *Ten Canoes* and his contribution is affectionately remembered by the current day community. Rainger then goes on to propose that the “creation theology” method of theologian Willie James Jennings is a way to

articulate what happened in the filming and audience reception of *Ten Canoes*, namely appreciation of the vision of creation offered in the film, respectfully overhearing and entering the story of Australia's First Peoples, experiencing the "pedagogy of joining" that enables a process of transformation.

The following article, from Scott Cowdell, examines the distinctive method of René Girard, a scholar widely used as a dialogue partner with theology even though he himself was not trained as a theologian. Cowdell explores how the foundational mimetic theory underpinning Girard's work can be seen to intersect theology and anthropology. A basic understanding of Girard's thinking is assumed in Cowdell's article, which can be summarised as follows: all desire is mimetic (that is, we desire to have what others have); this desire leads to conflict and violence, which is in turn controlled by the scapegoat mechanism common to religious systems defined as "sacred violence". The Bible witnesses to Jesus Christ as the truly innocent sacrificial scapegoat who both reveals and denounces the scapegoat mechanism, revealing a God who is wholly outside the processes of sacred violence. Cowdell's essay explains and defends Girard's claim that Christian revelation is both anthropological and theological. He concludes the essay with examples of Girard's thought as it can be found in modern theology.

The next contribution, which we have placed at the centre of this issue, fully conjoins theology and anthropology with history. The core text was originally written by Kambati Uriam (1961–2017), a theologian from Kiribati who taught at both the Pacific Theological College (PTC) and University of the South Pacific (USP), both in Suva, Fiji. After Uriam's untimely passing, the historian Helen Gardner asked the permission of his widow, Neina, to continue work on an article he had had in development. With her blessing, and the guidance of several of Uriam's colleagues at PTC and USP, Gardner edited the text to give it the full and final form you will read here. In the article, Uriam and Gardner consider the influence of Sione 'Amanaki Havea in developing "Coconut Theology", the first widely known attempt to develop a distinct indigenous Pacific Christian theology. They trace the history of Havea's development of Coconut Theology, and note the criticism as well as the support it has received in decades since.

Anthony Rees examines connections between homelands and emblematic foods, conceptually bringing together Israel's desert wanderings and the modern migrations of Pacific Islanders. He notes how, during the desert wanderings, Israel looked fondly back on the meat, fish, cucumbers, melons,

leeks, onions, and garlic they enjoyed while in Egypt, savouring a memory that erased the brutal facts of their captivity. In the desert, manna came from heaven, but the more attractive food was the grapes, pomegranates, figs, milk, and honey waiting in Canaan. In rejecting manna, Rees argues, Israel was rejecting “the land itself”—the desert through which they moved—and in desiring fruit, milk, and honey they were anticipating and defining their real homeland. Similarly for Pacific Islanders, food is often considered emblematic of people’s true homeland. Examining the Fijian concepts of *vanua* (a broad term encompassing place, people, and chiefdoms) and *kakana dina* (“true food”, which includes starchy root crops) with reference to the work of the Methodist theologian Ilaitia Sevati Tuwere, Rees asks how relationships to one’s homeland and its foods are affected in migration.

The following article, by John Cox, examines how “prosperity gospel” theology has underpinned Ponzi schemes in Papua New Guinea. He observes that just as many anthropologists have until recently held fundamentalist Christianity at arm’s length, so have many liberal theologians looked askance at “health and wealth” doctrines as a sanctification of greed, not something to be considered seriously. But Cox points out that in Papua New Guinea, where he has long studied fast money schemes, a moral economy of sharing means that “rampant individual accumulation is not an acceptable goal.” He also observes the distinctions that Papua New Guineans make between different kinds of schemes and their promoters, and concludes with a question about how the core topic of “greed” might be reconsidered by theologians, anthropologists and historians.

Ying-Cheng Chang then tells the stories of two remarkable indigenous Taiwanese Christians whose posthumous reputations have developed in notably different ways. A woman named Jiwang Iwal, now known as “the Mother of Indigenous Churches in Taiwan”, converted to Presbyterianism at a vivid moment in her life, being stopped by Han Chinese clergymen on her way to kill her third husband with a knife. Baptised as the first indigenous Taiwanese Christian, Jiwang became an evangelist herself, and is fondly remembered by indigenous Taiwanese Christians far beyond her own local group. Indeed, as Chang writes, she has become “iconic” for the ways she empowered her community and helped to make Christianity make sense in local terms. The second figure, a Han Chinese man born Ng Chiong-hui, later took the Japanese-influenced name “Shoki Coe” during the period of Japan’s colonisation of Taiwan. Raised Presbyterian, Shoki Coe became a leader in

indigenous Christianity, serving as the principal of Tainan Theological College and Seminary in Taiwan, and helping to establish the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan as an independent body, as well as being appointed director of the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches (WCC). He is credited with having first used the term “contextualisation” for theology at a meeting of the WCC in 1972, ensuring that he has a degree of fame—academic fame, at least. Chang notes that he is not well remembered by many Taiwanese in the way Jiwang Iwal is.

We are grateful for the interest that Derrick Lemons has shown in this project, both through his attendance at our gatherings and, more particularly, in his careful attention to the essays gathered here and his concluding remarks in the Afterword to this volume. We hope that these essays from Canberra-affiliated authors have made a useful contribution to his larger project, and that they also represent the continuation of a fruitful dialogue within our own unique region of Australia and the Pacific.

Endnotes

- 1 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperOne, 2001 [1951]).
- 2 Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, edited by Robert C. Kimball (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 42.
- 3 Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1974 [1966]), 87–125. See also John Morgan, “Religion and Culture as Meaning Systems: A Dialogue between Geertz and Tillich,” *Journal of Religion* 57, no. 4 (1977): 363–75.
- 4 Courtney Handman, *Critical Christianity: Translation and Denominational Conflict in Papua New Guinea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 83.
- 5 Eugene A. Nida, *Customs and Cultures: Anthropology for Christian Missions* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954).
- 6 See, for example, Steven B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1992) and Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1985).
- 7 For example, see the work of Ilaitia Sevati Tuwera of Fiji [*Vanua: Towards a Fijian Theology of Place* (Suva and Auckland: Institute of Pacific Studies at the University of the South Pacific and College of St. John the Evangelist,

- 2002)]. Matt Tomlinson offers a commentary on Tuwere's theology from an anthropological perspective in "Gender in a Land-Based Theology," *Oceania* 85, no. 1 (2015): 79–91, and *God is Samoan: Dialogues between Culture and Anthropology in the Pacific* (unpublished manuscript, n.d.).
- 8 Here we are drawing on the discussion offered in Timothy Larsen, *The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
 - 9 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956): 322.
 - 10 Larsen, *The Slain God*, 197.
 - 11 Larsen, *The Slain God*, 225.
 - 12 See especially Joel Robbins, "Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship?" *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (2006): 285–94; "Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology for the Good," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 3 (2013): 447–62.
 - 13 See Philip Fountain and Win Sen Yau, "Editorial: Anthropological Theologies: Engagements and Encounters," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24, no. 3 (2013).
 - 14 The passing references here are to Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study in Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* (New York: Morrow, 1928); Marshall Sahlins' *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972); and the work of Sarah Coakley and Michael Banner as discussed in the article by Fountain, Hynd, and Tan herein.