

# ON THE PREMISES AND POSSIBILITIES OF DIALOGUE: A READING OF JOEL ROBBINS' THEOLOGY AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

What would anthropology, enriched by theoretical resources drawn from the field of Christian theology, but remaining deeply engaged with the ethnography of everyday lived Christianities, look like? Is there a chance to develop a conversation between anthropology and theology that would be 'transformative' for both disciplines? These are the questions Joel Robbins sets out to examine in his book *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life*.

Joel Robbins is a socio-cultural anthropologist currently working as professor of anthropology at the University of Cambridge. He has published widely on anthropological theory and methodology, and especially on cultural and religious change and the anthropology of value and morality. He is best known, however, as a researcher of (Protestant) Christianity and architect of the research field of the Anthropology of Christianity. His prize-winning ethnography *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society* (2004) has inspired many to choose Christian cultures and phenomena as their primary research topic. *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life* (2020) continues Robbins' work on exploring the epistemological premises of anthropological research in general and that of Christianity in particular (see also Engelke & Robbins 2010; Furani & Robbins 2021; Robbins 2006). The book focuses on the intersections between Christian theology and anthropology—a topic that has attracted

increasing interest in recent years. Robbins himself (p. 8) mentions the edited collections by Lemons (2018), Meneses & Bronkema (2017a), and Mathews and Tomlinson (2018) as examples of this recent interest in an interchange between theology and anthropology and other humanistic and social science disciplines.

I read Robbins' book as a scholar of religion specializing in the anthropological research of religion and, in particular, Christianity. However, owing to my past studies, I am not a total stranger to sociocultural anthropology and theology, either. However, I approach the discussion on the relationship between anthropology and theology to a great extent from the position of an external observer. From such a position it is easy to recognize the value of the book's approach not only for anthropology and theology, but also for many other disciplines. In the field of the study of religion, for example, attempts to figure out the discipline's present relationship to theological research and thinking (and vice versa) have been going on for some time (e.g. Arnal & Braun 2008; Cady & Brown 2002; Helmer 2012; Knott 2007; Tafford 2021; Wiebe 1999). The views presented have varied greatly depending on the geographical and academic context (an observation, which is worth bearing in mind also when thinking about the exchange between anthropology and theology), revealing the complexity of factors informing interdisciplinary relations at theoretical, methodological, and institutional

levels. Robbins' book focuses on the first of these levels, offering a useful example of how to lower the barriers between theology and the study of religion—and between any other disciplines, for that matter—and so to forward science. In doing so, however, we ought not to lose sight of or veil the differences between disciplines related to their fundamental premises in the philosophy of science.

In what follows, I will take up one question related to the book's premises and two additional points of view for further developing interdisciplinary exchange between anthropology and theology along the lines laid out in the book.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Robbins finds promising common ground for bringing anthropology and theology into dialogue in the field of theoretical discussions in particular. He notes (p. 5), that 'theology and anthropology can have their greatest transformative influence on one another if they reach out to each other not only in ethnographic but also in theoretical terms'. The key theological concepts discussed in the book are those of interruption, atonement, judgement, eschatology, and passivity. These are brought into dialogue with discussions within the anthropology of Christianity on cultural change, ethics, and anthropology's relationship to societies and the people it studies. It is undoubtedly useful to bring together different conceptual understandings and conceptualizations. Reflecting on my own research on indigenous Amazonian Christianities, I have found this kind of interdisciplinary cross-fertilization beneficial, as it allows us to build a more nuanced picture and profound understanding of people's lived Christianities. I am currently, for example, working to understand the importance

that Amazonian Yine Christians give to having equal opportunities and the role this value has in the constitution of their interdenominational relations. What I have found good to think with in this process is the theological notion of and discussion concerning social justice.

Reading the book, I was left wondering, however—and this is my question concerning the book's premises—what, in the end, is being cross-fertilized or brought into dialogue? The book does not directly lay out its understanding of the two disciplines. First, with anthropology, it can be discerned that we are dealing with a discipline interlinking ethnography and theory and aiming to understand people's lived worlds. In the case of theology, however, the reader is left with less information. The author does bring forth the challenge the great variety within theological thinking presents for interdisciplinary exchange, and the, by necessity, limited scope of theological theory discussed in the book (p. 26). The discussions of the difference between anthropology and theology centering around the notion of judgement, on the one hand, and the 'God question', on the other, can also be held indicative of how these disciplines are (to be) understood. Yet, it is quite hard for a reader not deeply knowledgeable in theological theorizing to locate the theological approach discussed. What are we talking about when we talk about theology in this context? What are the differences between, let's say, Lutheran and Catholic theological perspectives in relation to the topics examined? Or those presented within systematic theology, practical theology, and biblical studies, for example? (See Meneses & Bronkema 2017b, 4.) Approaching these questions with ethnographic curiosity, I wonder if these possible differences matter in any way for the cross-fertilization of theology and anthropology and for the consequent analyses of Christian lived experiences?

## ETHNOGRAPHIC THEORY-FORMATION AND CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIES

Moving on, my first point concerning future dialogue between anthropology and theology is related to ethnographic theory-formation. Robbins elucidates the way in which theological understandings can be employed as theoretical resources in anthropological concept formation by juxtaposing the process with those of the formation of ethnographic theory and the conceptual work within the so-called ontological turn. An example of the first one is the notion of the ‘dividual’ most famously developed and discussed by Marilyn Strathern (1988). The latter is exemplified by the coining of the notion of perspectivism to characterize Amerindian ontologies (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Lima 1999). One area of theology in which theory-formation akin to these processes has already been conducted is indigenous theology. Indigenous theologies are in many ways committed to identifying the common ground between people’s lived experiences and Christian theology and to finding vocabulary to talk about theology in a way that resonates with local life worlds. An example of such vocabulary is the Central and South American indigenous concept of *Sumac Kawsay*, which roughly translates as Good Life, comprises the aspects of social and environmental interdependency, and is equated with the Christian gospel (see Opas 2017a). Engagement with indigenous theology and other contextual theologies—the ways in which they are being made and how concepts are being developed within them—could therefore prove fruitful to the project of anthropological theory formation. At its best, it could also bear important ethical and decolonializing dimensions, countering the power hierarchies inherent in the

anthropological quest. Studies relevant for this kind of interdisciplinary dialogue between indigenous theology and anthropology are many, but in the South American context, for example, I am not aware of any deliberate attempts to foster such dialogue (which, of course, does not mean that there aren’t any).

## THEOLOGIES IN THEMSELVES

The other point I wish to make concerns the concepts to be employed in the investigation of people’s lived Christianities. In addition to the concepts examined in Robbins’ book, there are numerous others, whose employment in research certainly would benefit from bringing ethnographic data and theological approaches together – for example, the notion of the human body. But the concept I wish to take up here and which I think would merit in-depth examination, is that of theology itself. The varied uses of the category of theology could in themselves form an important focus for anthropological (and theological) research on Christianity. How can academic theological interpretations of what theology is contribute to the understanding of local level negotiations of theology and its role in organizing people’s lives (and vice versa)? This question has recently been raised by several anthropologists, for example, in the volume edited by Lemons (2018) to which Robbins also has contributed (see Cannell 2018; Howell 2018; Percy 2018). Although focusing on an individual theological question and not on theology *per se*, also Robbins’ discussion on Devil beliefs in *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life* comes close to this kind of examination. Using the case of the Ewe of Ghana (see Meyer 1999) as an example, Robbins scrutinizes how folk theologies are informed by and contradict different denominational or confessional theologies,

and how the latter relate to one another and affect the Ewe social and religious landscape. I believe that through interdisciplinary exchange concerning the concept of theology we could generate a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon called Christianity. A useful model for such exchange is provided by the discussions concerning the views and uses of the concept of Christianity conducted within the field of the anthropology of Christianity, as well as within research on inculturation and contextual theologies (although there is still much more to be done in cross-pollinating these views). In addition to posing the question what is Christianity, this scholarship has raised the question over agency: who is a Christian? (Garriott & O'Neill 2008; Robbins 2003; see Opas 2017b) Correspondingly, engagement in interdisciplinary dialogue on the question 'who is a theologian?', could prove fruitful for research on contemporary Christianities (see also Haynes 2018).

I have wished here to present a question and raise two points – admittedly from a research position closer to anthropology than theology – which could be of use in future theoretical exchange between the two fields. These could be coined as three questions: What do we talk about when we talk about theology? Whose theology are we talking about? And, what could be achieved by studying the notion of theology itself? Pursuing answers to these and other questions in interdisciplinary dialogue is not, however, valuable only to the fields of anthropology and Christian theology. Engaging in dialogue enables (and forces) scholars to examine each discipline's underlying epistemological and ontological premises and is therefore likely to generate a yet better understanding of their intrinsic and distinctive characteristics. Robbins' book provides an

example of such disciplinary self-reflection through interdisciplinary dialogue. I look forward to further theological and anthropological takes on this exchange.

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