

JUDGING FROM THE INSIDE: A THEOLOGICAL READING OF JOEL ROBBINS'S *THEOLOGY AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN LIFE*

Recent years have seen three monographs (and some anthologies) dealing with the relationship between theology or faith and sociocultural anthropology (referred to simply as 'anthropology' from here onwards). Larsen's *Slain God* (2014) analyses how early British anthropologists had a personal relationship with matters of faith while Furani's *Redeeming Anthropology* (2019) agonises the hegemony of Enlightenment secularism in anthropology. What is common to these texts is that they do not differentiate between theological argumentation or theology as an academic discipline and personal faith. Joel Robbins' latest book, *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life* (2020), recognises this difference, which is why, as a theological don of a non-confessional government-run university, I can recognise myself reflected in it. One of the reasons for Robbins's ability to distinguish between the two may stem from his childhood experience concerning a rabbi who did not consider it absolutely necessary for proper execution of his work to be a believer, while many others probably would have (Robbins 2020: xii). The context of an academic theologian is the same: I may not consider that personal faith is a *sine qua non* of academic theology while some others certainly do.

For a theologian embracing the truly global nature of Christianity, Robbins' book

is delightful reading. It is thought provoking, challenging, and rewarding not least in the way in which it interweaves anthropological theory with theological concepts and insights, and in this manner continues what Douglas Davies (2002) has done earlier. It displays an anthropologist who is particularly well informed on Christian theology, not only Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition at the grassroot level but also (largely Lutheran) academic theology. This extension facilitates dialogue between the two disciplines. Theology is a slippery concept in the sense that it covers both the discipline and what the discipline is studying, leaving an area where these two get mixed. This is inevitable considering the existential personal dimensions of even academic theology. Robbins navigates this duality expertly.

I begin by discussing the relationship between the two disciplines and conclude with some views on what theology should learn from anthropology. Regarding the relationship of the disciplines, there are two areas in Robbins' analysis distinguishing them that I have elected to deal with: object of study and normativity. Moreover, I also address the relationship between the researcher and the researched persons.

ON THE OTHER, AND THE OTHERS IN RESEARCH

The God question is inevitable in theology—either you study texts, practices, or people for whom God is a significant question or you engage yourself in personal-existential treatment of topics involving the God question. As long as the God question is involved in one way or another, and there is an acknowledgement of the possibility of addressing it directly (even if every theologian does not do that), we are talking about theology. When the God question is limited strictly to a topic of the researched persons, theology turns into general study of religion.

Robbins insightfully discusses anthropology's uneasy relationship with secular modernity (see also Furani 2019). On one hand, in its radical openness towards other cultures, it challenges the secular modern claims of universality. On the other hand, it is a secular modern project. The secular nature of anthropology is seldom questioned, hardly ever challenged, and never denied, so it seems. In the field, an anthropologist embraces the other ways of seeing the world but back home, (s)he plays by the book of Enlightenment rules. Personal commitments and convictions are bracketed (even if today routinely acknowledged). In this manner, an anthropologist, even if studying one's own community, turns into an outsider who plays the role of marginal insider. The difference between the researcher and the researched is inescapable.

A theologian has the possibility of transcending the researcher-researched barrier when studying faith communities in a manner not possible for an anthropologist. A theologian is a member of the studied community—either more or less concretely or for the sake of argument. When interviewing

Kimbanguists, members of a church initiated in the Congo, I could start from the premises of sameness. We both recognised each other as Christians, albeit with diverging views. Their faith includes at least half a dozen divine incarnations while my personal pantheon is less populated. As an insider to Christianity, I could engage in debates and participate in their theologizing. As an outsider to Kimbanguism, I could still get involved in their theological argumentation as if I were one due to my theological approach. Robbins (2020: 18–19) describes the ontological turn in anthropology as going in a similar direction. He describes how for some anthropologists, this has started to mean that the anthropologist should try hard to believe in other people's ontologies. Robbins's reading of the founder of the ontological approach in anthropology, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, is that for him, taking other ontologies seriously is to let the other ontologies shatter our conventional views, thereby creating new concepts. The people in the field are partially let in, even in the theory building part of research, but the pursuit of anthropological knowledge is still the professional's endeavour.

The ontological turn understood in this manner—or as needing to make oneself believe the others' ontologies—does not go all the way theology can go at its best. The theological researcher can, and should, see any reflective Christian as a theologian—a person making sense of her faith (see Kollman 2018: 92–95: 101). The bottom line then is that the theological researcher and the persons related to the fieldwork are all playing the same game on the same field. This search is naturally in the interest of both of the parties. This means mutual sharing but also mutual challenge. None of the parties needs to make oneself to believe the other's ontology but both are involved in the search of meaning and truth. Confronting

the mysteries of life, all ways of knowing are relativised, and each has something to offer.

NO ONE JUDGES FROM THE ARCHIMEDEAN POINT

What surprises me in many anthropological writings making use of theological literature is the lack of Majority World theological Ansatz (cf., however, Farmer 2003). Academic scholars of theology close to anthropological fields are seldom scrutinised in anthropology (Premawardhana 2021: 593). I would imagine that Majority World liberation and contextual theologians would be desirable dialogue partners for anthropologists due to their cultural openness. Or, is it rather a demerit because the anthropological theoretical dialogue often takes place in the western Enlightenment cultural bubble where also the theologians accepted as partners of dialogue find themselves? (See Bialecki 2018)

When studying religiosity of people, it is the potential for normativity in theology that can open avenues closed for anthropology. Normativity also calls for a judgment. It is precisely in the area of judgment where the differences—and simultaneously, potentialities for mutual enrichment—are laid most bare. Robbins points out that anthropology does not expect the researcher to carry out judgment (Robbins 2020: 87–90). Radical openness willing to understand the internal logic of everything is a part of the anthropological credo. Yet, when studying marginalised people—should one not pass a judgment on the structures and conditions rendering them oppressed? Many anthropologists, at least today, acknowledge the need to pass judgment in situations of oppression (e.g. Farmer 2003). However, according to Robbins, their discipline does not equip them with tools to do so.

In theology, depending on the subdiscipline and the context, judgment is either avoided or desired. However, there is always a possibility of judgment, and there are precursors. The criteria for judgment vary but there is a lively never-ending debate about the criteria one should use. E.g. the South African Apartheid government was simultaneously one of the most and least Christian governments in the world. Formally, it openly supported especially Reformed Christianity while the racist Biblical interpretation of this Christianity was in such a variance with many other interpretations, that the major Apartheid supporting church was excluded from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Henriksson 2010). Additionally, the government was a target of criticism and action from the World Council of Churches and numerous other Christian organisations and churches.

Robbins points out that despite the sometimes-harsh theological judgment, theologians tend to be modest in their judgmental role (Robbins 2020: 91). I would be harder on many theological judgments. Theological judgments concerning non-western forms of Christian faith are often uninformed. One tends to start from the premises of a preordained (invariably western) set of criteria for sound Christian faith and judges upon the appearances before even learning to know what, how, and why the studied community believes in a way not familiar to the theological judge. Here, theologians have a lot to learn from anthropologists on how to understand the cultural other in a non-judgmental manner. This does not mean that theology should rid itself of judging but rather that the judgment should be suspended until a sufficient level of understanding (see Vähäkangas 2020). Urapmin Christians, among whom Robbins carried out his major fieldwork, also function as a reminder that Christian

judgment always should (see how normatively judgmental I am as a theologian!) contain the dimension of self-judgment (see Robbins 2020: 61–64).

ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO DISCIPLINES

So, how is and how should the relationship between these disciplines be? Theology is openly normative, often in a confessional manner, while anthropology builds on specific values and Enlightenment normativity, albeit in somewhat concealed manner.

In Christian theology, there is a built-in sense of incompleteness which is balanced by an expectation of things to come.¹ The fallen state of humans and the world is not the last word, and there is eschatological hope. Christian ontology is, at its best, a reflection on being as becoming. Emphasis on tradition, so prevalent in many a theology, should be balanced by visions of the future. All this means is that Christian theology proper, no matter how normatively it behaves, should always see itself as relative and imperfect. This relativism and imperfection are a good starting point to relating to other ways of seeing the world, like anthropology. There is always something new to be learned and absorbed into the theological vision.

While I leave it to anthropologists to decipher what to learn from theology, I purport that theology and anthropology are not incompatible. They are clearly distinct disciplines, and their approaches to the God question are and should be different—there is no point making anthropology into theology (see Robbins 2020: 3; Lemons 2018: 5–6). Yet, inasmuch as none of the parties sticks to

a closed form of confessionalism—theistic in the case of theology and atheistic in the case of anthropology—there are numerous points of contact, as Robbins elaborates. Furthermore, at times scholars had better forget their disciplinary monotheism and temporarily enter in the skin of the other. A theologian, when suspending judgment, needs to see and think like an anthropologist. An anthropologist, in turn, when forced into judging a Christian community, can borrow tools from theology.

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NOTES

- 1 This kind of approaches are found in existential anthropology, too, e.g. Biehl & Locke 2017.

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