

RESPONSE—JOEL ROBBINS

I am grateful to the editors of Suomen Antropologi for inviting two such engaged and stimulating responses to *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life*, and to Minna Opas and Mika Vähäkangas for writing them. For a work that has been interdisciplinary from its inception – initially written by an anthropologist as a set of lectures to be delivered to an audience of academic theologians – it is hard to imagine a better pair of respondents. Both Opas and Vähäkangas are gifted ethnographers who know anthropology well, but at the same time they come to the book, respectively, from the study of religion and from theology.¹ This gives these comments a welcome parallax view on the anthropology/theology relationship. As Opas and Vähäkangas both note, the dialogue between these two disciplines has been quite active lately, and their insightful responses raise important issues for that discussion.

I begin my response by taking up a topic that Opas raises in particularly helpful terms. For some time now, anthropologists involved in the anthropology and theology dialogue have tried to unpick the knot of how to define theology as an object of engagement and study. Vähäkangas offers two answers to this question when he writes that theological scholars at least should see ‘any reflective Christian as a theologian’ after specifying a bit earlier in his text that whenever the ‘God question’ is in play, we are talking about theology. The ‘God question’ is a phrase I borrowed from the theologian Sarah Coakley’s comments during one of the discussions of the original lectures. Coakley used it to refer to the problem anthropologists and theologians who want to work together often have of finding productive ways to acknowledge the fact that

they may personally have divergent views about the existence of the Christian God, and that in any case they fit God into their frameworks of thought in very different ways. The second of these definitional moves accords to at least some extent with the passing attempt at definition I make in the book, borrowing another discussion contribution from Coakley, who suggested ‘speaking the truth about God’ as the purpose of theology, while also quoting the theologian Eberhard Jüngel (2014b: 232) when he says that even when theologians adopt ‘ways of speaking’ from ‘scientific argumentation,’ the ultimate goal of their discourse is ‘proclamation’ (Robbins 2020: 162). Yet even as taking up the God question may be defining feature of (Christian) theological discourse, anthropologists can and do discuss it as well and they can do so without, at least in their own self-understanding, doing theology (for two influential instances of this see Bialecki 2014, Luhrmann 2020). So perhaps it is best to stick with Vähäkangas’ first definition, though his opening discussion of the way at least some theologians, himself included, do not consider ‘personal faith... a sine qua non of academic theology’ still suggests that theological modes of thought are not open only to ‘reflective Christians.’ The kind of complexity we are running into here turns out to bedevil at every turn what may at first look like a simple definitional task, and this is surely why the issue of what anthropologists should count as theology has become such a prominent topic of discussion at the anthropology-theology interface.

If we do begin with the thought that even if not all theology is produced by ‘reflective Christians,’ at least any reflection on their faith that such Christians produce can count as

theology, we come to something like Naomi Haynes' (2018: 266) influential definitional claim that 'theology is what people think about God and how they ought to relate to him.' As she goes on to acknowledge, this construal of theology suggests that it is not something done only by specialists, or even more narrowly by academics employed as theologians, but is instead something that can take place 'on the ground', in the course of lay people's everyday lives. While not unsympathetic to this move, which certainly passes the pragmatic test of supporting good ethnographic research in Haynes' own work and that of others, it is not one that I take in my book. There, I focus mostly on the work of academic theologians, though not exclusively, as Opas notes in her discussion of the part of the book devoted to a discussion of different views of the Devil and atonement. One of the reasons for this was a desire on my part to confront anthropology with what I take to be another highly productive academic approach to studying, among other things, the nature of human life and of human possibilities. This is a confrontation that I hope might foster some new theoretical developments on the anthropological side. One could say, then, that in order to stage an *interdisciplinary* encounter of this kind, I took the path of examining theology as, precisely and recognizably, an academic discipline. At the same time, based on past experience of what Vähäkangas sees as the often harsh judgements some theologians make of 'non-western forms of Christian faith,' I also wanted to engage kinds of theology that some academic theologians might not be inclined to understand as mostly of interest to anthropologists rather than to themselves. Having said this, however, I should acknowledge that my interest in theology also stems from a desire to see anthropologists look more carefully at Christian intellectual life in all the

settings they study, and for this purpose broad definitions of the kind Vähäkangas and Haynes offer are very useful and point out one good way forward for what Derrick Lemons (2018) has called theologically engaged anthropology (Robbins 2019).

Having considered a bit of the complexity of the definitional question when it comes to theology, I want to suggest that Opas has made an important point that is likely to be a major tool for us to use in untying the definitional knot with which we find ourselves confronted. Her suggestion is that we should approach the question of how to define theology as an ethnographic problem. One might imagine that anthropologists have tried this already, but I am not sure anyone has actually done so in quite the way Opas lays out. Looking back at my fieldwork among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea after reading Opas' comment, I realized that they were emphatic that they did not do 'theology' (though they did not use the word). The real experts in Christianity, pastors and others repeatedly told me, were 'Bible Doctors' in places like Australia. Many Urapmin did want to gain knowledge of the kind these figures hold, and initially they hoped I might be something like a Bible Doctor myself. Early in my fieldwork, I in fact had to work hard to dispel the assumption that I had this kind of expertise (Robbins 1997). In making the observation that the Urapmin did not see themselves as qualified to act as the kind of religious experts we might call theologians, I do not mean to suggest that they are not 'reflective Christians' – a good deal of my work has aimed at demonstrating precisely the reverse. But it is an important fact about them that they think there are others in the world who know more about the history, doctrine, and even future of Christianity than they do. In light of this, I wonder if this quality of Urapmin Christianity

is part of the reason I have not usually gravitated to the theology ‘on the ground’ side of the anthropology and theology dialogue—it would go against Urapmin self-understanding to paint their reflections on Christianity as theology as they might understand it. Another example of how attending ethnographically to how different people define theology can enrich anthropological discussions comes from Maya Mayblin’s (n.d.) contribution to another discussion of my book, where she points out that in the Catholic tradition there are different kinds of theological productions that have very different kinds of authority. Any anthropologist wishing to dialogue with Catholic theology, she notes, would need to reckon with this diversity. These are just two quick attempts to think about what approaching the definition of theology ethnographically may add to anthropological work in this area. More generally, I think Opas is right that looking at what theology means ethnographically in the places we study is an important way forward.

Of course, Opas asks not just what counts as theology, but also how we might define anthropology. This may well be as difficult a task as defining theology, and I am going to address it only briefly and very partially here. Both Opas and Vähäkangas mention the role ‘judgement’ plays in how I differentiate the two fields in the book. For a good portion of the discipline’s twentieth-century history, many anthropologists avoided judging the people they studied, seeking to learn about and from the different ways of life they encountered, rather than to evaluate them. Theologians, by contrast, tend to see judgement about the validity of various understandings of the Christian faith as an important part of their task. Yet anthropology has changed in recent decades, and more and more contemporary anthropologists do want to judge if not the people they study, then at least the situations

in which those people find themselves. Thus, I think many anthropologists would now agree with Vähäkangas when he writes that ‘when studying marginalised people—should one not pass a judgment on the structures and conditions rendering them oppressed?’ But I often wonder if anthropologists make these judgements as anthropologists or rather on the basis of their own taken for granted understandings of the nature of oppression and other human ills. I say this for at least two linked reasons. The first is that the oppression anthropologists find people facing, and the suffering they find such oppression producing, tend to look remarkably similar everywhere, including in the worlds anthropologists themselves come from (Robbins 2013). When an ethnographer does not take this tack, but looks instead at how the people studied understand their own lives, it can produce unsettling results. The best example of this is Saba Mahmood’s (2012) profoundly influential discussion of the relation between submission to God and ‘traditional’ gender roles, on the one hand, and ideas and valuations of freedom, on the other, in the lives of pious Muslim women in Cairo. In keeping with Vähäkangas’ careful phrasing, I think part of what makes Mahmood’s argument so powerful is that she does not judge ‘structures and conditions’ as a way of avoiding direct judgement of her interlocutors themselves, but instead listens to what her interlocutors are telling her about the way they value submission, even if this makes it much more difficult for her to render judgement at all. I think moving slowly in matters of judgement the way Mahmood does—slowly because one must move through the dense lifeworlds of those one works with before one begins evaluating their lives—is a good model for anthropologists. The fact that it is perhaps not the dominant model among those who are interested in making judgements about the lives

of the people they study relates to the second point about this topic I want to make.

This second point is one I develop at some length in the book. It refers to the fact that theologians are at least ideally carefully trained in how to make judgements about various kinds of Christianity, learning to refer to varying mixes of biblical interpretation, tradition, and religious experience in arriving at evaluative stances. They are also ready to support the stances they do take with explicit arguments (in the book, I take some of Vähäkangas' work as an example in this regard). Anthropologists are not, in my experience, trained in this explicit way in how to work toward the judgements they make, leaving them to rely on their own broad cultural inheritances to guide their practice. If they do now want to make rendering such judgements a routine part of how they define their task, then it would be good for them to develop approaches to such training. The grounds of anthropological judgement will certainly be distinct in some ways from those of theological judgement, but I think anthropologists can learn from theologians' traditions of pedagogy about ways judgemental capacities can be trained.

I'd like to dwell on this issue of judgement a bit longer to offer one more example of the kind of challenges anthropologists who study Christianity confront in these areas. In offering an example of a topic about which theology can inform her own ethnographic research and analysis, Opas notes that Amazonian Yine Christians highly value having equal opportunities, and that one domain in which this is important to them is that of interdenominational relations. This is a compelling case, not least because many anthropologists would not think to look at interdenominationalism as a key area in which to study this value in the field. But the fact remains that equality is a comfortable value for

many western social scientists. How, by contrast, might many anthropologists want to judge Christians such as those Naomi Haynes (2017) has studied in Zambia, who use differences in spiritual power to create hierarchical patron client relations that they value in the same way Yine Christians value equal opportunity? Can theology, including its traditions of judgement, perhaps help anthropologists in rendering a comparison of these two cases useful? I do not have answers to these questions to offer, but I think this is an area that bears further work in the interdisciplinary conversation we are discussing here.

Raising the issue of anthropologists' differential evaluations of equality and hierarchy brings me to Vähäkangas' question about why anthropologists do not seem to gravitate toward theological traditions that theologians themselves might think anthropologists would find congenial. He offers 'majority world liberation and contextual theologians' as cases in point of those whose 'cultural openness' he thinks would perhaps make them attractive anthropological dialogue partners. To these two examples, I might add comparative theology as a third one. While not wanting to deny the possibility that there could well be productive opportunities for dialogue with these theological traditions, I tend to agree with Vähäkangas' own answer to his question: these traditions seem to flatter anthropologists own assumptions, for example about the value of equality, and so creative sparks may not fly quite so abundantly, at least at first, when anthropologists encounter them. By contrast, the engagement with indigenous theologies looks to be immediately promising in the way Opas suggests, and I would expect to see a good deal of work in this area in the future (for an important early contribution, see Tomlinson 2020).

I want to conclude by taking up the point Vähäkangas makes when he mentions the ‘existential personal dimensions of even academic theology.’ I think many anthropologists feel there is something of this in their field too. This is perhaps why Levi-Strauss (1992: 55) called it one of the few ‘genuine vocations,’ something that like ‘mathematics or music’ (or might he have said faith?) one can find in oneself, even if one has never been taught about it. More than this, I think some important personal dimensions of both theology and anthropology may rest on similar, though probably not quite the same, foundations. For theologians, Vähäkangas tells us, one foundation is something like a built-in sense of the ‘incompleteness’ of the present world (and our knowledge of it) and the way this is balanced by ‘an expectation of things to come.’ Before the eschaton arrives, there is still work to do. In my book, I put the theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg and Clifford Geertz in conversation to show that anthropology also relies on a conviction of incompleteness. Among anthropologists, this incompleteness refers to the nature of the human person, who requires social and cultural supports to become fully itself. Because societies and cultures differ, this means the nature of the human person and human society are never fixed; anthropologists expect that both are open to change. Whether or not they are clear about what work might remain to do in relation to this incompleteness, anthropologists do think it is in the nature of human persons and societies that such work is possible. Surely this is part of the anthropological motivation for exploring all of the different ways sociocultural formations have shaped human lives. I mention this to indicate both that many anthropologists, like academic theologians, are apt to have personal stakes in their work beyond simply ‘professional’ ones, and

also that the shape of these stakes may, despite their differences, have some areas of overlap. This is another reason that both disciplines may stand to learn things about themselves and each other in the course of the discussion that is emerging between them. This is a discussion to which these Opas’ and Vähäkangas’ rich responses have made important contributions.

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NOTES

- 1 I want to acknowledge here that Mika Vähäkangas was the first academic theologian with whom I engaged in sustained dialogue. In many ways his ability to help a theological novice gain the confidence to explore this field, and his guidance on some places to begin, was one condition of the possibility of this book coming together. This, too, makes him an ideal respondent to it. It is also relevant to note that I first met Minna Opas when she was a postdoctoral fellow at the anthropology department at the University of Edinburgh, and I have always thought of her as a deeply anthropological scholar.

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