

Book Review

Theologically Engaged Anthropology

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An irony of the advance of secularisation in Western society is that religion has not so much disappeared as it has been detached from its theological moorings and been placed in the centre of debates on rights in the context of identity politics. This shift reflects a response to the rise of Islam in Western Europe and the intractable issue it poses of whether to be treated as an ethnic or racial group or as a form of belief. An additional complication is that a multiplicity of forms of religion present themselves to the state for recognition in terms of charitable status, schooling and rights of conscience. Some of these, as with the Jedi, have been rejected, as in the case of the U.K. Charity Commissioners, which refused to treat it as a cogent and distinct religion. Others based their claims to be a religion on the basis of their philosophical beliefs, Ethical Vegans being an example, who sought the protection of the UK Equality Act, 2010. A further complication is that religion has become a term denoting the ultimate and the sacred, which has been expropriated into marketing and brand names, for instance in the case of the retail chain, *True Religion Clothing* set to cater for all fashion needs.

The outcome is that sociology and anthropology have been forced to take an increased interest in religion as a critical facet of culture. This expansion in significance is reflected in the interest centred on postsecularism which draws attention to the return of religion. This collection edited by Lemons, presents a timely reflection on how the axis of theology and anthropology is shifting in ways that adjust how the two disciplines are to come to understand each other. Whereas sociology seems still immune to a dialogue with theology, ethnographic interests in Islam, Pentecostalism and other forms of religion have brought prospects of penetration into anthropology closer. This rich collection of essays of remarkable range opens out many vistas for both disciplines so to that degree what is supplied is an important bench marker which illustrates the way each can enrich the other.

The collection emerges from two mini-conferences held in Atlanta, U.S.A. in September 2015 and at Cambridge, U.K. in February 2016, both being funded by the Templeton Foundation. The latter location reflects the importance of two essays by Robbins (2006; 2013) on the tensions generated by a dialogue between anthropology and theology. He supplies his own chapter 13 on the state of this exchange and also a concluding response to the collection as a whole. Not surprisingly, given its lineage in dealing with theology, the vast majority of the 20 specially commissioned essays are Christian in orientation. All the essays are generous in documentation; each is given a useful abstract in the helpful introduction by Lemons; and each has extensive footnotes which, with a valuable bibliography at the end of the collection, provide material for further reflection on future developments. Leaving aside the interregnum properties of the collection there is a nagging sense that it does not quite make the splash it deserves.

First, the collection reads like a tract in seduction addressed to anthropologists who spurn the prospect of entering the theological domain. The difficulty which emerges is that anthropology might well envisage interest in the ethnographic concerns of the collection but not in ways that require attendance on theological matters. Secondly, that hesitation is legitimised by the way the interests of the collection are much devoted to ethnographic

theology which emerges as something lying between the concerns of the sociology of religion and the conventions of religious studies. Thirdly, although nascent, there are more advances by sociology into theology than are recognised in the collection. These might indicate what anthropology ought to take into account in the expectations it presents to theology. Peculiarly, Bourdieu is treated as an anthropologist rather than a sociologist. Lastly, despite the photograph on the cover portraying the reception of communion, only the briefest of references are made to Catholicism, so neglecting attendance on the contributions made by Douglas, Evans-Pritchard and Turner to the deployment of theology in anthropology. Their contributions have been well explored by Larsen (2014), a joint contributor with King, who, in chapter 3, supplies one of the better essays in the collection.

Too often, the contributions veer into philosophy and away from hard anthropological issues, such as ritual and symbol, which are laden with theological implication. This neglect might reflect the liberal Protestant bias of the collection towards ethnographic theology. The outcome suggests an odd replication of the bias of the sociology of religion in the 1980s to treat new religious movements (or sects and cults to use their less euphemistic designation) as of exemplary concern simply because they were small in scale and their belief systems could be contained within them. Such studies of belief in all its diversity mask an issue (which the collection does consider in chapters 2, 5 and 20) as to which theology is to be the dialogue partner of anthropology and even more notably which religious form is most beneficial to its reflections. The result is a sense of incompleteness in the theology presented, a point the Anglican theologian, Sarah Coakley picks up on in her response to the collection at the end (pp. 367-375).

In the applied chapters, 14-18, three superb essays stand out, though in each case the topics deal with atypical issues and very particular theological dilemmas. Cannell's account of Mormonism (or the Latter-Day Saints) and female ordination is an astute piece of ethnography and links well to the theological complications so generated (chapter 14). Likewise, in chapter 15, Haynes' account of Pentecostalism in the Zambian Copperbelt is convincing in showing how a linkage could be made between theology and anthropology. Clooney's contribution in chapter 16 on comparative theology (Catholicism) with his call for inter-religious dialogue with Hinduism is unlikely to entice meaningful responses from anthropologists. Percy, as a prominent Anglican theologian writes on mood and his religion in chapter 17, one that is as scrappy as it is portentous. It makes an invidious comparison with an artful essay by Webster (chapter 18) on the Exclusive Brethren and their doctrine of separation in Belfast. Webster presents a very subtle account of fieldwork undertaken in hazardous circumstances of gaining access. A solid case for taking theological considerations into anthropological is tellingly supplied here.

In his introduction, Lemons does indicate that the collection is to be treated as preliminary in its explorations. The issue of the types of theology to emerge in anthropological fieldwork is explored well by Howell in chapter 2. Uncovering the hājibs of anthropology that partition contacts with theology, Furani provides an imaginative account in chapter 4 of the possibilities that could arise with the use of what he terms ethnographic immersion in belief systems. The dialogue between ethnographic theology, formulated as a response to cultural and social theory in the 1980s in relation to anthropology is well explored by Bielo in chapter 8. More directly, theological matters in relation to anthropology are given scrutiny by Davies in chapter 11.

As to be hoped and expected, the pivotal essay in the collection is chapter 13 by Robbins. It really does break new ground. He indicates that prior to the 1990s, an anthropology of Christianity was non-existent. Now he claims this has become a major trend in anthropology, though what he has in mind is the emergence of Pentecostalism and Prosperity Gospel. The difficulty is that these can be contained within conventional understandings of sociology and anthropology without reference to the disruptive effects of a theology which demands understanding of Divinity, salvation and the intractable issues of death which theodicy explores and to which Davies has drawn attention in his contribution in chapter 11. Again, as with other contributions, there is a feeling of being on some frontier difficult to discern but whose future direction might unsettle anthropology.

Seemen's essay in chapter 19, aptly titled 'Divinity Inhabits the Social: Ethnography in a Phenomenological Key', illustrates such possible unsettlements. Writing from a Jewish perspective, he points to an unfamiliar and peculiarly unrecognised difficulty with the proposed dialogue with theology that Jewish and Islamic thinkers do not conceive of it in ways that reflect Christian formulations which at present control the index of what counts. This opens out a new area of interest in exploring the nature of the theologies of non-Christian religions and how these might illuminate dialogues with both sociology and anthropology. As with others in the collection, Seeman notes that anthropologists have been remarkably tepid in their responses to the emergence of ethnographic theology. Some of these themes arise also in Chapter 3, where Larsen and King reflect on the contributions of Classic Christian theological anthropology to understanding the unity of the human race. Much archival work is explored on these nineteenth century debates so central to the development of social anthropology which that discipline now discounts.

In his generously constructed response to the collection, Robbins indicates that he is seeking not so much the exploration of folk forms of belief as the generation of formulations derived from theological reflection. This aspiration reflects a certain degree of wistful thinking percolating through the collection. It denotes a curious

orphan-like property to the collection, as it navigates without parentage bestowed by either anthropology or theology. Even though the collection does not offer a coherent way forward for a dialogue between both which is increasingly necessary with prevailing shifts in cultural understanding, nevertheless what appears is stimulating, well worthy of reflection and a sound marker of preliminary possibilities.

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