

NEWS & OPINIONS

Comment on Merz, “From Culture to People: Thinking Anthropologically with Jesus and Paul”

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There is much in Merz’s provocative article that I agree with—his cautions about culture, his Christian call to close divisions and his highlighting of commonality amidst diversity. But I also have some basic disagreements. His proposal to drop culture as a term is blind to the many ways that culture is increasingly used across a number of disciplines, with illuminating results. His example of Jesus and Paul is also a flawed use of the biblical text.

First, Merz follows the tradition of “writing against culture” that became an influential anthropological subfield in the 1980s. There have been many fine defenses of the culture concept by anthropologists in the last decades (Sahlins 1999; Lewis 2014; Boggs 2004). I won’t rehash those here, as readers can look them up. But let me add to the defense of culture with a survey of how culture fits into some fascinating work being done across disciplines today.

Merz argues that anthropology should give up culture just at the time other disciplines are using it in very insightful ways. For example, a major sociological study of religious parenting, published earlier this year (Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo 2020) expected to find a lot of variance in the cultural models of religious parents. Instead, they found “cultural consensus and coherence” and argue against a model of culture that is primarily fragmentary, disjointed or contested. Chapter Five, “Theorizing Cultural Models,” makes the general argument and is an excellent explanation of how notions of culture have evolved, from the Parsonian model of bounded cultures, to the Post-Parsonian one (e.g. Merz’s cited author James Clifford, or Ann Swidler), to the authors’ favored “Cultural Models” approach introduced by cognitive anthropologists like Naomi Quinn, Claudia Strauss, and Roy D’Andrade. They also draw upon the theory of “critical realism,” which has a following among many Christian scholars, such as the voluminous work of the sociologist and Catholic Margaret Archer (2008). To adequately

understand what motivates people and causes them to act, one needs good social theory.

If you want to understand social problems, culture is essential, alongside two other central concepts, “structure” and individual/agency (Archer 2008; Stephens, Markus, and Fryberg 2012), as evidenced by recent studies from psychologists and economists (Kearney and Haskins 2020). The fields of cultural sociology and cultural psychology have been growing significantly while developing tools to understand how culture works in ways more insightful than what most anthropologists are doing.

Anthropologist Joe Henrich’s recent tour de force (Henrich 2020) on why “weird” Westerners are “psychologically peculiar and particularly prosperous” puts culture, especially the radically new exogenous marriage practices instituted by the Church, along with literacy, at the center of the story. You can find culture in the brain, according to the growing area of cultural neuroscience (Sasaki and Kim 2017) and related disciplines. History uses it extensively, along with political scientists like Ron Inglehart and social psychologists like Geert Hofstede and Shalom Schwartz, whose work on worldwide cultural contrasts has been cited thousands of times. This more survey-based work has its limitations, which is where rich and thick ethnographic work (like Merz’s own) can clarify both commonality and difference.

There is little debate in these disciplines about getting rid of culture as a noun. (I doubt that one can use it as an adjective without it having some meaning as a noun.) Anthropology will be even more of an ignored backwater if it eliminated culture, as it would limit how anthropology could contribute to important debates on social change, history, or inequalities. Disciplines like sociology and psychology seem much more relevant on these issues than an anthropology that is now turned in upon itself precisely because of the effects of critiques of culture in anthropology. Work that breaks down

interdisciplinary boundaries, such as that of the above-mentioned Henrich, who combines anthropology with psychology, economics and evolutionary biology, is best positioned to make future contributions to understanding human life.

After his initial critique of the culture concept, Merz then moves “from culture to theology,” though Merz uses more direct biblical examples rather than theological ones. It’s an interesting argument, given the unique position of Christians caught between contrasting epistemologies. Christians of various stripes have attempted to hold reason and faith (and its biblical connections) in a relationship without dropping wholeheartedly into either scientism or fideism. Some Christians combine these epistemologies in illegitimate ways, as I believe creation scientists have. Merz’s argument seems to make the same mistake as the creation scientists do. The Bible teaches us about our relationship to God. It is not an attempt to understand the world in modern, scientific terms, and I don’t think we can use it, or the examples of Jesus or Paul, to derive analytical categories. Jesus and Paul lived before science as we know it existed. That discourse would have been mostly incomprehensible to people in that time. We use many other essential concepts discovered since then, like gravity. De-emphasizing “knowledge” in favor of “engagement” risks falling into the long-noted evangelical trap of anti-intellectualism (Noll 1994).

There is another reason why I don’t think Jesus or Paul’s non-use of culture has any import. People have different gifts, roles and callings (Romans 12:4-8), a notion both biblical and scientific. Jesus and Paul had very unique callings. Theirs was to call people back to God, not necessarily to understand humanity scientifically. While their calling is part of us as Christians, most of us have other callings or vocations, including as anthropologists who categorize humanity into different groups and try to figure out both commonality and diversity, and thus avoid inaccurate stereotypes.

Merz is concerned about proper engagement with others. “Omniculturalism,” for instance, is an approach proposed by cultural psychologists that is sensitive to Merz’s concerns (Moghaddam 2012). During interactions with others our primary concern is to “give priority to human commonalities.” Secondly, however, “group-based differences” are recognized so diversity and connected inequalities are not ignored and cultural differences can adequately be addressed when they arise.

I think what Merz is arguing is that science and its concepts are not the only way of talking about human life, and that when relating to people, “culture” can sometimes get in the way. Perhaps dropping culture as a noun is appropriate for ontological anthropology,

though even then I’m not convinced. But anthropology is an expansive discipline, with many different approaches to understanding human life, from “hard” scientific, to humanistic. Culture should certainly play a strong role in many of these approaches.

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