

NEWS & OPINIONS

Response to Comment by Michael Jindra on Questions of Culture, Anthropology, and the Bible

Johannes Merz

Anthropology may be likened to a diamond in the sense that it shows different facets depending on the way and angle you look at it. A diamond's renowned hardness further resembles the tough and contentious issues of the culture debate. In this sense I welcome Jindra's comment (2021), since it sheds light on parts of the discussion I do not agree with, but that certainly merit to be heard and considered.

Let me pick up the discussion where Jindra leaves it, namely by affirming that anthropology is a broad discipline with a myriad of approaches. Jindra and I come from different angles and accordingly, our disagreement concerns questions of perspective, method, and purpose. In my response I seek to untangle his approach from mine by using his two main points of contention, namely the importance of the term culture and the use of biblical examples.

Based on Jindra's comment, I understand that he follows a scientific approach to anthropology, which has its roots in using science to render the discipline more serious and credible. Science then provides a common basis that facilitates exchange with other science-based disciplines. Key to this approach has been an analytic focus on the culture concept. Anthropology's goal, in Jindra's words, is to "categorize humanity into different groups and try to figure out both commonality and diversity, and thus avoid inaccurate stereotypes"¹ (Jindra 2021, 35). This kind of anthropology, judged from my perspective, comes to rest on its considerable achievements of promoting the culture concept beyond disciplinary boundaries. This leads anthropologists to rehash the culture concept in new clothes, while its character continues to be shaped by the concept's ideational roots. All humans classify the world around them in one way or another. The problem I see with the culture concept is that it categorizes humanity as its central analytical tenet, which is inevitably divisive. The

idea of human commonality, however, does not enjoy the same analytical privilege and is thus prone to be sidelined.

As powerful and influential science may be, only a minute global minority of academics actively subscribe to it. A discipline that studies cultural and human diversity seems to me deeply flawed when its practitioners prescribe its foundational culturally situated approach and theoretical basis to others. This not only restricts access to science, but also limits analytical possibilities to the extent of not being able to take counterparts seriously, thereby curtailing our understanding of humanity (Merz 2017, forthcoming 2021).

As anthropologists we should not only study humans in all their diversity and commonality, but accept different perspectives as potentially valid contributions from the global majority to our theorizing. We can do this by assessing ideas from outside anthropology, whether they come from other academic disciplines or the people we seek to understand. Maybe most importantly, this concerns religious ideas rejected by secular science, as I argue with Sharon Merz (Merz and Merz 2017). Rather than facilitating interdisciplinary exchange by sharing the culture concept across disciplinary boundaries, I aim to break down disciplinary boundaries more radically and open up anthropology to contributors whose perspectives might be fundamentally different to our own. While presently we can only guess how such an anthropology might develop, it has potentially wide-ranging intellectual and theoretical consequences. This endeavor might appear risky, but I consider it so far the most promising way toward becoming serious about "decolonizing anthropology" (Harrison 1991) and thus promoting the discipline beyond the intellectual and scientific strongholds centered on Europe and

¹ I assume that "accurate stereotypes" would be cultural traits that typify a given group of people.

America. Let me be clear that this is not a call for renouncing reason. On the contrary, in our global age of increased intentional disinformation and proliferation of conspiracy theories, reason and intellectual integrity is more critical than ever.

Rather than rejecting science, I seek to alter and add to it in order to break it free from its ideational roots and relinquish its privileged position. For anthropology, this means turning to a more philosophical stance in a broad sense, which is open to what we cannot imagine or anticipate through being inquisitive, reflective, and reflexive. For me, anthropology is not a science in the way I see Jindra use the term. Rather, I understand anthropology as a way of thinking that requires personal investment and engagement on the basis of deep reflection, both on ourselves and those we seek to understand. This leads to decentering the culture concept from anthropology's analytical core, but I do not think it means to give up on the idea of culture as such.

Joel Robbins has described such a shift as follows: "And today, quite a few anthropologists do not imagine that they have much to do with the study of culture at all—preferring to think of themselves as studying individual experiences or the varying perspectives of people situated within the diverse groups that make up any social formation" (2017, 37).

I do not dispute that recent approaches to culture within and beyond anthropology can be worthy, fascinating, and insightful, even though I contest the value of their analytical basis. Similarly, I can sympathize with Jindra's view that anthropology, at least in its more scientific approach, could be increasingly sidelined if culture were eliminated, but again, I beg to differ.

I am a consultant for SIL International, a faith-based NGO comprised of people from different cultural backgrounds. One of my tasks is to promote and affirm the importance of anthropology for SIL's work, especially among non-anthropologists. This has never been easy.

I found that people are happy to think about culture, an idea they are much more familiar with than anthropology. They readily use models that generalize, simplify, and tend to dichotomize the complexity of human diversity. Such models, such as Geert Hofstede's six dimensions of cultures, may lead to some understanding within the given parameters of the model, but they also reinforce problematic popular ideas about culture. I found that such culture models do not motivate people to engage further with human diversity, for example by turning to anthropology. Rather, together with Sharon Merz, we have found that focusing on culture actually stifles interest in anthropology.

We now promote anthropology by starting with ourselves as humans, rather than culture. This allows us to move from the intimately familiar toward a growing understanding of the complexity of human commonality and diversity. Promoting anthropology as the study of humans, rather than culture, has so far led to more people gaining an understanding, acceptance, and sometimes even appreciation for anthropology. It also allows us to demonstrate more readily how to apply anthropology across different disciplines.

At a more academic level, the culture concept can provide a bridge between anthropology and other disciplines, but the question of what it is to be human has the same potential. Just because the culture concept stems from anthropology does not in my mind guarantee that other disciplines will continue to look favorably toward our discipline. Would not an anthropology that seeks to push the boundaries of current knowledge potentially be better placed to continue to contribute to other disciplines? In a nutshell, I propose that maintaining the culture concept does not favor anthropology, but rather jeopardizes its future.

Turning to how I use biblical examples, I readily agree with Jindra that the Bible "is not an attempt to understand the world in modern, scientific terms" (Jindra 2021, 35). I do, however, object to Jindra suggesting that I combine what he calls scientism and fideism in illegitimate ways. He can only do so by equating contestable philosophical concepts that lack consensual definitions like culture with observable and verifiable natural phenomena like gravity (see, for example, Amos 7:7-8; Luke 4:9; Acts 20:9), both of which he seems to consider scientific concepts. It is rather this that I would call a lack of intellectual integrity. Besides, I find this contention extraneous, since the absence of the word culture in the Bible, which evoked this digression, is not the reason I reject the culture concept. I merely use it as a starting point for my argument.

My main point, namely that for Jesus and Paul human diversity is rooted in human commonality, cannot be considered an analytic concept in scientific terms. The notion draws on religious ideas in the sense that it refutes the diversity-versus-commonality dichotomy by linking the two ideas relationally, thus rendering them interdependent. I do not see this as the fruit of science, but of a theologically engaged and/or postsecular anthropology. Whether we favor culture or not, diversity in commonality questions the use and validity of the culture concept, as well as other philosophical concepts that have scientific roots, such as relativism. The reason being that the culture concept stresses diversity and division, which it keeps conceptually demarcated from commonality.

Furthermore, the question of human and cultural diversity is important to what “[t]he Bible teaches us about our relationship to God” (Jindra 2021, 35). As Christians, we do not all relate to God in the same way, since relationships are always shaped by our diverse backgrounds. Similarly, as bearers of God’s image or likeness (Genesis 1:26), our view of human diversity has implications for how we understand God in a more theological sense.

Despite my writing against the culture concept, I do not expect it to go away any time soon. For now, discussing it is important also for thinking through what anthropology might be for us and for others. Whether anthropological consensus will reject or continue to accept the culture concept, or whether we will find a middle ground or come up with novel ideas, remains conjecture. Like the multi-faceted diamond, however, we will probably continue to have different perspectives and approaches to anthropology and the notion of culture.

References

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Johannes Merz is a senior anthropology consultant with SIL International. He has a PhD in cultural anthropology from Leiden University, the Netherlands. Together with Sharon Merz, he has been based in Benin, West Africa, since 2002. One of his goals is to promote anthropology by making it more accessible beyond the discipline. Johannes regularly offers courses and workshops, and lectures at Moorlands College, Christchurch, UK, and the Theological College of Northern Nigeria, Jos, Nigeria.

Author email: johannes_merz@sil.org
