

NEWS & OPINIONS

Theologically Engaged Anthropology: An Update

J. Derrick Lemons

The opportunities for engagement between anthropology and theology have increased dramatically over the past few years. Since December 2014, a collaborative group of anthropologists and theologians have considered the question, “What can theology contribute to Cultural Anthropology?” The group organized panels for the Society for the Anthropology of Religion, the American Anthropological Association, and the American Academy of Religion and participated in mini-conferences at the University of Georgia, the University of Cambridge, and the University of Oxford.¹ The collaboration resulted in two important outcomes. First, two frameworks were developed that allow anthropologists and theologians to engage with each other’s disciplines to improve their research. Second, the Center for Theologically Engaged Anthropology (CTEA) at the University of Georgia (<http://research.franklin.uga.edu/tea/>) was established to support future research of theologians and anthropologists.

The stratified and transformational frameworks of engagement developed through the work of the CTEA are detailed throughout twenty chapters in the forthcoming edited book entitled, *Theologically Engaged Anthropology: Social Anthropology and*

Theology in Conversation, to be published by Oxford University Press in early 2018. In brief, the stratified framework recognizes that “a complex reality, such as religion, will have multiple layers or strata, each of which demands to be investigated by a research method appropriate for that stratum.”² With the stratified framework, an anthropologist and theologian can collaborate to better understand a religious behavior while maintaining their disciplinary boundaries. For example, in my research about the missional church movement in America, I have described the development of this movement and its concern about reaching outside the confines of the local church to impact the community at large. However, I discovered early in my research that this movement’s foundation was intensely theological and required input from theologians to uncover the underlying justification for creating missional churches. Thus, I sought input from theologians who guided me to the work of Karl Barth and Lesslie Newbigin. The work of these theologians and its linkages to the missional church movement enabled me to unpack the theological stratum. This stratum would have been completely missed without a theologian’s voice. In the end, I produced a deeper ethnographic description of this important contemporary movement in America.

Another approach is the transformative framework which is defined as “a deep engagement in which theological and anthropological questions, problems, issues, or topics pass through a process of mutual collaboration and new insights emerge.”³ I discovered an example of the use of the transformative framework in my fieldwork involving missional church interlocutors. Because the missional church paradigm

J. Derrick Lemons is an assistant professor of Religion at University of Georgia, where he focuses on the intentional innovations of religious subcultures and the influence of theology on Christians across time and space. He is also the Director of The Center for Theologically Engaged Anthropology. Author email: dlemons@uga.edu.

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² Lemons, J. Derrick, ed., *Theologically Engaged Anthropology: Social Anthropology and Theology in Conversation* (Oxford University Press, 2018), Chap. 7 by Alister McGrath.

³ Lemons, J. Derrick, ed., *Theologically Engaged Anthropology: Social Anthropology and Theology in Conversation* (Oxford University Press, 2018), Introduction.

focuses on contextualization of Christianity, anthropologists and theologians collaborated to develop an approach to ministry that facilitates the engagement of church members with those outside of the church in culturally and theologically informed ways. Of course, this collaboration was not altogether new. Within the broader field of missiology, a long-standing collaboration between anthropologists and theologians already existed. Traditionally, missiology focused on foreign missions, but missional church interlocutors—some of whom had done work in missiology—redirected missiology to also focus on helping Christians be missionaries in their home communities. They argued that traveling to a foreign country is no longer necessary to engage with another culture; the cultural other has moved to America. In this example, the traditional boundaries between anthropology and theology were of no concern. The focus was using the best practices of both disciplines to address a problem of mutual concern. In the end, the stratified and transformational frameworks allow anthropologists and theologians to engage each other's disciplines to better their research.

The founding of the CTEA is a major step forward toward providing a sustained focus on theologically engaged anthropology. The primary mission of the CTEA is to continue to inspire and support theologically engaged anthropological research. One way this will be accomplished is to provide an online forum for connections to be made among scholars and a place to share resources as scholars produce them. Another way is to sponsor conferences and provide funding for innovative research. For example, the CTEA has received applications this year from graduate students and recent graduates who have completed their fieldwork and need support to use the stratified or transformational frameworks to reach new insights about their research. At two mini-conferences in fall 2017, the graduate students will be provided feedback by Founding Fellows of the CTEA—Francis X. Clooney, S.J., Brian Howell, Derrick Lemons, Alister McGrath, Martyn Percy, Joel Robbins, and Don Seeman. Ultimately, participants will produce a journal article to be published in a special journal issue. In the future, the CTEA will continue to support conferences and provide research grants as funding allows.

If you have any questions, would like to schedule a talk at your institution or conference, would like to submit a collaborative grant, or need support for your research, please email the director of the CTEA, Derrick Lemons, at dlemons@uga.edu. For more general information about the CTEA, go to <http://research.franklin.uga.edu/tea/>.