

NEWS & OPINIONS

From Dim Past to Bright Future: A Response to Timothy Larsen's article, "British Social Anthropologists and Missionaries in the Twentieth Century"

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I have had the privilege of collaborating with Timothy Larsen for a decade. Rereading "British Social Anthropologists and Missionaries in the Twentieth Century" (2024 [2016]) brings back fond memories of our early discussions about creating a field of study where anthropologists and theologians could work together. It was fascinating to revisit the history of tensions between anthropologists and missionaries, who are applied theologians. One reason that this tension exists is because anthropologists often rely on missionaries to conduct their work.¹ Missionaries are often essential partners in learning the culture for both so-called armchair anthropologists and those who conduct field research. Sjaak Van Der Geest even referred to anthropologists and missionaries as brothers. He explains in his abstract: "Anthropologists act like missionaries in spreading the beliefs of their discipline and interpreting other religions in terms of their own faith. A further similarity gives missionaries an advantage over anthropologists: they stay longer among 'their' people, have a better command of the language and are likely to become more integrated into the communities in which they work" (Geest 1990, 588). Based on this quote, I encourage you to read

Larsen's article through the lens of two feuding brothers.

Sensing the time had come for the feuding brothers to reconcile, Tim and I, with the help of Naomi Haynes, Brian Howell, Joel Robbins and many others, developed a field of study to provide a way to talk across the divide. This field was eventually named Theologically Engaged Anthropology and has become very productive. I will leave the other respondents to more directly discuss the history of the tensions brought out by Larsen's article. I want to use my words to point anthropologists and theologians to an opportunity to stop feuding and learn from each other.²

A growing number of anthropologists and theologians have decided that conversations with each other are worthwhile (Fountain and Yau 2013; Meneses et al. 2014; Robbins 2006). Theologians have openly utilized the tools of anthropology to aid their work, and some anthropologists, in a much less open way, have made important theoretical and ethnographic contributions by allowing theology to influence their work (Larsen 2014; Lemons 2018b). In this response, I provide a brief summary of my early interest in scholarship that simultaneously considers

¹ I should note that the missionaries who are particularly useful are those who have lived in the field for decades. Short-term missionaries do not have the same level of insight.

² I am repurposing with permission my article entitled "An Afterword: Conversations Among Theology, Anthropology, and History," found in *St Mark's Review*, no. 244 (2018): 114-23. I would like to thank Michael Gladwin, the long-term editor, for his support of the original article and this repurposed article.

anthropology and theology and present two frameworks for this scholarship.

My interest in theologically engaged anthropology began in an unusual way. While completing my MDiv at Asbury Theological Seminary, I learned about connections between anthropology and theology through the works of missiologists and theologians like Paul Hiebert, Eugene Nida and H. Richard Niebuhr. Also, I witnessed my anthropology and missiology professors, Darrell Whiteman and Michael Rynkiewich, seamlessly transitioning between discussions of theology and anthropology while considering the social worlds of people around the world. Through their teaching, I encountered the anthropological greats, like Tylor, Frazer, Douglas, Evans-Pritchard and the Turners and theologians like Luther, Wesley, and Barth. From my experience as an MDiv student, I knew theology had a lot to contribute to anthropology, and I never questioned the importance of this exchange for my doctoral dissertation research which focused on the ways leaders in the missional church movement created intentional cultural change. I did not realize at that time that many anthropologists view this exchange with skepticism. That realization waited until I joined the faculty ranks in 2008 and began to interact with a broader range of anthropologists. I discovered that very few anthropologists had a background in theology and those who did have this background did not openly share this information. Initially I followed my peers lead and hid my knowledge of theology too, but reading Joel Robbins 2006 article, "Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship?" and meeting other anthropologists who found theology useful for uncovering previously hidden meanings behind social behavior emboldened me. I found that theology was important enough to my ethnographic data that I could not neglect it. These factors led me to write a grant ultimately funded by The John Templeton Foundation to examine the question "How can theology contribute to cultural anthropology?"

The John Templeton Foundation project created opportunities for ongoing conversations among an international team of anthropologists and theologians. The team formed working groups of researchers in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America to discuss the value of cross-disciplinary collaboration. Two important outcomes resulted. First, we developed frameworks that facilitate sustained, collaborative research between anthropologists and theologians. Second, we

established the Center for Theologically Engaged Anthropology (CTEA) at the University of Georgia (<http://research.franklin.uga.edu/tea/>) to support future research of theologians and anthropologists.

Frameworks for Research

The primary mission of the CTEA is to enrich both anthropology and theology by increasing the number and quality of conversations among scholars in these disciplines. The CTEA has done this by bringing together anthropologists and theologians at working conferences and asking them to produce research frameworks that provide structure for theologically engaged anthropology and examples of using these frameworks. The CTEA has produced two research frameworks. They are the stratified and transformational frameworks, and both assume shared research interest and mutual respect between the disciplines. You can find an extensive discussion of the stratified and transformational frameworks in the following articles and books:

Richman, N. and J. D. Lemons. 2022.

"Introduction: From Rupture to Repair." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 33: 33-348.

Available from:

<https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.12456>.

Lemons, J. Derrick, Courtney Handman, Jon Bialecki, Simon Coleman, Naomi Haynes, Maya Mayblin, Timothy Larsen and Joel Robbins. 2022. Book forum on Joel Robbins' *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life*. *History and Anthropology* 33(4): 516-547.

DOI: [10.1080/02757206.2022.2119232](https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2022.2119232).

Lemons, J. Derrick. 2021. "An Introduction to Theologically Engaged Anthropology." *Ethnos* 86(3): 401-407.

DOI: [10.1080/00141844.2019.1640760](https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2019.1640760).

Robbins, Joel. 2020. *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lemons, J. Derrick, ed. 2018. *Theologically Engaged Anthropology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stratified Framework

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” (McGrath 2018, 131). This framework focuses on maintaining traditional disciplinary boundaries so that anthropologists and theologians do not feel compromised. Scholars who use this framework refer to both anthropological and theological issues in the phenomena they are studying, but they do not intermingle the two perspectives. They keep them distinct. Roy Rappaport’s book entitled *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* provides one of the best examples of this framework. In the introduction of his book Rappaport makes it clear that he speaks as an anthropologist who is considering theological issues. He is not attempting to practice theology:

This book is not a theological treatise but a work in anthropology. As such, its ambitions are more general than those of any particular theology. As an anthropological inquiry, its assumptions are, of course, exclusively naturalistic, but it respects the concepts it seeks to understand, attempting not only to grasp what is true of all religions but what is true in all religions, that is, the special character of the truths that it is in the nature of all religions to claim. (Rappaport 1999, 2)

Rappaport was open to considering ritual from a theological perspective, but due to his Durkheimian foundation, he limited himself to speaking only about the anthropological aspects of ritual, specifically the observed and communal aspects (Peacock 2001, 208). In Larsen’s article, he mentions Edwin W. Smith who became acclaimed in anthropology circles. Smith acknowledged that he was inspired by anthropologists, but was careful to maintain his role as a missionary which allowed A.C. Haddon, Max Gluckman, James Frazer, and others to respect his work as a valuable piece of information within its strata.

The stratified framework is advantageous to anthropologists and theologians who are most comfortable maintaining disciplinary boundaries. As exemplified by Rappaport and Smith mentioned above, even when researchers maintain boundaries they can open themselves and their readers to new

vistas as they consider the perspective of the partner discipline.

Transformational Framework

The transformational framework involves a deep engagement between anthropology and theology to understand a specific ethnographic topic. In contrast to the stratified framework, researchers applying the transformational framework set aside the strict boundaries between anthropology and theology to make room for a transformational encounter. In general, theologians use this framework more than anthropologists. As an applied discipline, theologians expect transformational encounters to occur because of their work. Theology seeks to shape people’s beliefs and actions. However, systemic positivistic ideals remain in the anthropology of religion, even though we live in the era of post-positivism. Anthropologists of religion often do not imagine transforming others or being transformed because of their work. When Victor Turner shared with Max Gluckman that he and his wife converted to Catholicism because of transformational experiences in the field, Max proclaimed, “This is the worst news that I have ever heard!” (Kollman 2018, 83). Yet anthropologists Joel Robbins and Timothy Jenkins believe the transformational framework presents the best opportunity to make an impact in both anthropology and theology because new insights and theories are waiting to be discovered in the largely unexplored territories between the disciplines (Coakley and Robbins 2018; Lemons 2018c; Robbins 2018). It could be argued that Edwin W. Smith actually worked within a transformative framework, even though the expectations of the time required him to defer to anthropologists as the real experts. Given a transformational lens, would A.C. Haddon, Max Gluckman, and James Frazer have been able to celebrate Smith’s ethnographic success as something directly connected with his role as a missionary, rather than despite it?

The transformational framework is advantageous to anthropologists and theologians who need to expand traditional disciplinary boundaries to speak to new audiences or uncover new insights. One challenge of this framework is that most scholars are not proficient in both fields. To overcome a deficit in knowledge, scholars must find a collaborative partner. Another challenge is feeling out of step with many anthropologists and theologians. As I shared

previously in this article, I hid my knowledge of theology to fit in with other anthropologists.

Conclusion

I appreciate Larsen's article for plainly stating the bias of anthropologists who believed that the bias of missionaries made them unworthy colleagues. I hope that the stratified and transformational frameworks provide new lenses through which anthropologists can see new possibilities. Given the collective breadth of these frameworks, any anthropologist or theologian should be able to select an appropriate one to enhance the depth of their research.

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