

NEWS & OPINIONS

What Does it Mean to be Human?: The Value of the On Knowing Humanity Project

Joseph B. Modica

One of the most compelling aspects of Christianity for me is the study of theological anthropology, namely, addressing the vital question: *What does it mean to be human?* The second century church father Irenaeus said it this way, “The glory of God is humanity fully alive.” What does it mean to be “fully alive”? In other words, what does it mean for human beings to flourish? In many ways, these questions form the basis for theological anthropology. Historically, Christians affirm that the answer to these questions is that God became flesh and lived among us. Jesus Christ showed us what it means to be human. As Jesus tells his disciples, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10b NRSV). Human flourishing is at the core of theological anthropology.

The value of the On Knowing Humanity Project, and its associated Master of Arts in Theological & Cultural Anthropology program at Eastern University, is that it provides students with the exceptional opportunity to study this vital question with breadth, height and depth. Since we are enculturated beings, we often inadvertently succumb to the effects of culture without understanding its impact on our lives and institutions. Hence, we need this graduate degree program.

My colleague Dr. Eloise Hiebert Meneses is a visionary pioneer. Having studied anthropology at a fine research university, she experienced a marginalization of her faith during her graduate studies. As she puts it, “There was no place at the [anthropological] table for a person of Christian faith.” A sense of disciplinary “schizophrenia” (my analogy) emerged. How does one remain faithful to the Christian faith and still study well the discipline of anthropology? How then does a Christian enter the field of anthropology, which is often hostile to faith claims and blinded by its own epistemological beliefs and ideas? As Richard M. Weaver prophetically noted nearly two generations ago: *Ideas Have Consequences* (the title of his book, 1948). Thus, Dr. Meneses—along with her outstanding team of scholars—created this graduate degree to fill a huge lacuna. Now there is a

place where students can study well the discipline of anthropology through the lens of the Christian faith. Where else can one have an interdisciplinary experience (anthropology, theology, epistemology) while affirming and deepening one’s Christian faith? Where else can one study with accomplished scholars who believe that Christianity offers a winsome and plausible way of understanding culture, and, as Andy Crouch (2013) has aptly noted, also understand that Christians make culture.

So hats off to Dr. Meneses and her colleagues. I have been grateful to see the progression of this graduate program—from monthly Friday afternoon presentations and discussions to a national conference and now to students graduating and entering into the world as theological and cultural anthropologists. This is the gold standard of how a dream develops into discipleship, and how asking the question “Why not?” offers a witness to the world. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

References

- Crouch, Andy. 2013. *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*. Westmont, IL: IVP Press.
- Weaver, Richard M. 1948. *Ideas Have Consequences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



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