

NEWS & OPINIONS

The Ontological Turn for Christians

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Some time ago, I remember someone asking on the Fishnet listserve for Christian anthropologists, “What ever happened to worldview?” The writer was pointing out the fact that while missiologists still use the term freely, contemporary anthropologists rarely use it at all. In the response, Brian Howell’s helpful critique of the term was mentioned (Howell 2006). Howell had suggested that the term “lacked theoretical rigor” (310), and that it would be better to view people as drawing upon multiple “systems of knowledge” in the context of globalization (311). Globalization, he said, entails a “complex interplay of local and global factors within the local community” (317), yielding results that are not reducible to a single worldview held in common by a group of people. He pointed out that the same critique might be made of the term, “culture”.

The Ontological Turn . . .

Now, a new movement in anthropology, “the ontological turn,” has begun which has relevance to this question. Anthropologists in this movement take it as their purpose to study the ontologies of others phenomenologically, which is to say, without commenting on their truth value or trying to interpret them. Moreover, they propose that no one is in a transcendent position from which to evaluate other people’s ontologies. Ontological anthropologists critique previous work in anthropology for its deconstruction of indigenous views and their reduction to Western categories. So, for instance, to describe animism as due to a mistaken understanding of nature is to assume a superior knowledge of reality, and to misconstrue what animists mean, by placing the grid of our own understanding upon theirs. “There is no position of externality,” declare Albert et al. (2011:905), and therefore no justification for assuming any ontology to be the only “real” one. In fact, even more radically, ontological anthropologists suggest that rather than one ontological world, which we call “nature”, and multiple socially constructed worldviews or cultures, each of them at some divergence from reality, there are as many ontologies as there are beings in the world (including nonhuman beings) (Kohn 2015).

To understand this stance, we can begin with Roy Wagner’s penetrating analysis of the relationship between the ethnographer and the culture being studied, in which he suggested that cultures are invented by ethnographers, not informants, in the process of encountering “culture shock” (2016:4). Wagner was strong on the point that ethnographers have no right to interpret the culture of others in Western terms, saying, “For every time we make others part of a ‘reality’ that we alone invent, denying their creativity by usurping the right to create, we *use* those people and their way of life and make them subservient to ourselves” (16). Furthermore, we forget that they are observing and analyzing us at the same time as we are trying to comprehend them. Thus, “it might be helpful to think of all human beings, wherever they may be, as ‘fieldworkers’ of a sort, controlling the culture shock of daily experience through all kinds of imagined and constructed ‘rules,’ traditions, and facts” (35).

So, if the Western ontology cannot be taken as a given in the analysis of others’ cultures, how is the ethnographer to present the worlds of the people studied? It is at this point that the ontological turn goes deep into the wild, weird, and wonderful. Objects, they say, should be entered into as points of view, or perspectives, rather than as various items in a single universe. The Brazilian anthropologist, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who studied the “Amerindians” of the Amazon (in the line of, and with reference to, Levi-Strauss), suggests this method by deriving it from his own informants who believe that animals are people too (that is, have a subjective interior) (2014). In a well known example, Viveiros de Castro cites the Amerindians as pointing out that to jaguars, human blood is manioc beer (62). That is, it is not *like* manioc beer, it *is* beer to them because they drink it. Likewise, a pool of mud is a grand ceremonial house for a tapir and worms in rotten meat are grilled fish for vultures (57). Thus the ontological status of an object depends on the perspective of the viewer, and viewers themselves are objects in other objects’ perspectives. According to Viveiros de Castro, in contrast to the Western ontology of one nature and many cultures, Amerindian ontology is of one culture (everyone needs

beer, houses, etc.) and many natures (perspectives of the species involved).

The ontological turn is arguable the most radical relativism yet invented in anthropology. It permits no ground from which to theorize about culture as a whole or to claim an understanding of particular cultures beyond that which the informants themselves give. Rather it simply tries to penetrate these views and to understand them by way of contrast to other relativized views. Thus it does not reject comparison. Marilyn Strathern has fleshed out how the comparative approach works when external analysis is not permitted to trump local views (1990). Ethnographers find points of difference with their own (Western) background which they explore analytically as opposites (344). Viveiros de Castro suggests that these points of difference are set in such radically different worlds that all we will be able to do is to talk past one another in a kind of “controlled equivocation” (2014:87). One might say that, as has been predicted for a long time, relativism has eaten its own tail.

Not surprisingly, this strong challenge to anthropology’s own assumed ontology has been disturbing to at least some in the field. The ontological turn has been critiqued for being “essentialist,” claiming to know the minds of a whole group and to present them as uniform (Killick 2014), and for viewing ontologies in the same old-style monolithic terms that cultures and worldviews were. At a deeper level, there is a not unreasonable fear that the discipline itself might lose its grounding if multiple ontologies were permitted the same epistemological status as the current ontology. What would become of the history of ideas in anthropology, not to mention the ethnographic record, if all the various and sundry beliefs of the world’s peoples were simply considered true (as Edith Turner tried to do)? It is perhaps to allay this fear that Holbraad and Pedersen, who have recently written a comprehensive review of the movement, insist that the ontological turn is really just a heuristic device that adopts the concepts of informants provisionally for the purpose of creating new forms of understanding (2017:238).

. . . for Christians

For those of us who are Christians, anthropology’s treatment of the religious views of others, including their ontologies, has always produced ambivalence. On the one hand, religious beliefs and behavior around the world can indeed seem bizarre to those of us who are Westerners (less so to others). We too sometimes wonder how it is that reasonable people can believe that witches fly through the air and eat other people’s souls, that clans are literally descended from various animals, or that women who commit suicide on their husbands’ funeral pyres will be goddesses in the next life.

Minimally, we disagree with these views. But maximally as products of the modern era ourselves, we are not entirely sorry to see the long list of functional explanations for religion: cognitive, social, psychological, and so on. In the case of *other* people’s religions (and ontologies), anthropology’s explanations have been useful to us.

But most anthropologists (with some notable exceptions, see Larsen 2016), are confident atheists, and for them our Christian beliefs and practices are as bizarre as any other that they would classify as religious. In fact, the argument can be made that “religion” is just a residual category for things not viewed as real under secularism and therefore not worthy of serious discussion (Asad 1993). For secular anthropologists, the notions that a man who lived in the first century in Palestine was God incarnate, that the world was created not just by natural processes but by the willful act of a personal God, and that there is an afterlife that includes a day of judgment are all obviously unreasonable—in fact, it should be quite easy to talk people out of them. In graduate school, one of my professors declared that he simply did not believe that educated religious people believe what they say they do; they must be hoodwinking everyone for some reason. So, while they may be a bit more familiar, Christian beliefs are as difficult for anthropologists to explain as any other.

Explaining or interpreting religious beliefs is exactly what those in the ontological turn do not like. In fact, they say, it is in this deconstructing or unmasking of other people’s beliefs that anthropologists have revealed most clearly their own ontology. For instance, if an ethnographer reports that women plant taro at a certain time of year due to weather conditions, that statement needs no further explanation. Matters of practical economy make an immediate sense in an ontology of naturalism. But if the ethnographer further reports that various types of magic are associated with the planting, it will be necessary to perform various analytical operations on this behavior to explain it in terms of an accepted theory of religion. Most theories of religion are reductionistic in one way or another, since matters of the “supernatural” (their term, not ours) are not real in anthropology’s presumed ontology. In the end, say the ontological anthropologists, it is all about not taking informants seriously (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017:184).

I believe that the ontological turn in anthropology is valuable for us as Christians for two reasons: 1) it levels the playing field between secular or atheist and religious notions of what is and isn’t real, and 2) it opens the door for religious anthropologists to incorporate theology into their work of understanding the human condition and be taken seriously (Meneses et al. 2014). To some extent, these changes are already beginning to take place. Due to a seminal article by Joel Robbins in the

anthropology of Christianity (2006), formal dialogue has begun between anthropologists and theologians (cf. Meneses and Bronkema 2017; Lemons, forthcoming). But we should expect that admitting religiously-based ontologies into the anthropological discourse is likely to prove both controversial and difficult. In part this is because it is hard to picture how people from different ontologies can find a common language and have a coherent conversation, as mentioned above. But in part it is also because the current ontology of the discipline will have to be unsettled. Anthropology has specialized in difference, yet ironically finds difference at this level difficult to navigate. Yet, this is not a new problem. As Wagner points out, anthropologists have been struggling to understand and make sense of the other from the beginning, and have always found that struggle to unsettle their own views (2016:10). The difference now is the acknowledgement that the other is within the discipline itself, as religiously committed anthropologists are beginning to speak out (Asad 2003; Chakrabarti 2000). A formerly unified (Western) anthropological gaze on the rest of the world is being disturbed by a recognition of difference at home.

It is important for Christians not to simply follow every trend in an academic field (Wolsterstorff 1988). But it is also important for Christians to constantly be assessing whether they might have, however inadvertently, fallen into and become trapped in the trends of the past, such as in this case, that of a secular, Enlightenment-based, or modernist perspective on reality. From our “other” perspective, we must assess and then pick and choose what we find useful, or not, in the trends of a discipline. In the case of the ontological turn, I see a useful connection with the biblical epistemology of witnessing to truth without claiming to have full hold of it ourselves (Newbigin 1995). Also, there is a parallel between the ways that ontologies change, in massive shifts rather than incremental alterations, and our notion of conversion. And, of course, simply taking ontology seriously is to our benefit as we hope to ground our case for a better world not in an ontology of struggle for survival, but of God’s harmonious creation and divinely appointed human purposes (Milbank 1990).

Less useful to us is the ontological turn’s resistance to allowing outsiders to make judgments on others’ ontologies (this critique gets made by secular anthropologists as a resistance to the political implications of the work, see Kohn 2015:319). I am not recommending a return to the explanatory theories that tried to unmask others’ beliefs from a position of transcendence. Rather I mean simply an allowance for difference of opinion, and for debate. The critique may indeed be valid that ontological anthropologists are taking the ultimate transcendent position by speaking for others and presenting their ontologies as radically

different than our own. As those in reflexive ethnography have recognized, the absent anthropologist is actually taking the high ground on the issues (Clifford and Marcus 2010). A humbler position is simply to declare one’s own views, and to identify the sources of these views, but to do so with “universal intent” (Polanyi 1974). As Christians, we have an ontology that is the result of two millennia of church history and reflection on the Bible and the events of the New Testament. That ontology is unmistakably at odds with the secular naturalist ontology of anthropology (though there are points of agreement). Furthermore, we have a mandate to declare a gospel that only makes sense in terms of certain ontological assumptions. So we cannot sit on the sidelines as passive observers and declare how interesting these other views are. The humble thing to do is to join in the debate.

Conclusion

The ontological turn is only one of a number of movements in current anthropology, and may well collapse, swing back, or evolve into some further movement. Once again, I do not recommend that we pin our hopes for recognition of Christian truth on any trend in academia. Jesus made it clear that our message would be rejected until the time of his coming again, when it will be inescapable (John 15-17). Rather we should view such trends as doors that open or close, sometimes allowing, sometimes forbidding, us to witness to what we believe to be the truth. Under modernism, the ontological status of truth was assumed, but it was defined in such a way as to preclude taking religious views seriously. Since post-modernity, there has been a stronger recognition of real difference and of the complex ways in which truth is held. I see this breakdown in the unified view of truth in the academy and in Western culture as an open door, for now, to express the vision of the world that we have as Christians in terms that are both beautiful and persuasive (Milbank 1990:330).

I will finish with a reminder that the “news and opinions” section of the *On Knowing Humanity Journal* is intended as a place of dialogue on the issues. If you find this essay, or any of the other articles in the journal, to be of interest, please do submit a reply!

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