

# On Knowing Humanity Journal

Creating a Christian faith-based approach to anthropology, incorporating insights from theology into ethnography and analysis, and allowing religiously committed anthropologists to speak freely of the ways in which their commitments inform their theory and practice. Raising new questions and lines of research on subjects such as: the significance of humanity's unique calling in nature for personhood and the construction of culture; the underlying reasons for humanity's destructive behavior toward self, others, and the environment; and the role that divine redemption and hope play in human lived experience and practice. Reincorporating teleology, in the sense of purpose, into scientific understanding, inviting dialogue between anthropologists and theologians of all persuasions into a deeper understanding of the human condition, and encouraging the doing of anthropological research and writing through the eyes of faith.

VOLUME 5, NUMBER 1  
JANUARY 2021

# *On Knowing Humanity Journal*

Volume 5(1), January 2021

## Table of Contents

### Articles

- From Culture to People: Thinking Anthropologically with Jesus and Paul* 1  
Johannes Merz
- Individuals, Structures, and Human Agency in Community Development* 14  
Mike Mtika
- Paul's Teachings on the Uniqueness and Supremacy of Christ in Colossians 1:12-23 and Its Implications for Christianity in Africa* 25  
Valentine Chukwujekwu Mbachii and John Uchendu

### News and Opinions

- Comment on Merz, "From Culture to People: Thinking Anthropologically with Jesus and Paul"* 34  
Michael Jindra
- Response to Comment by Michael Jindra on Questions of Culture, Anthropology, and the Bible* 37  
Johannes Merz
- The CHIEF Approach: A New Strategy to Holistic Ministry* 40  
Mike Mtika
- The Politics of (Self) Division* 43  
Kevin Birth

### Book Reviews

- Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured A Nation* 45  
*By Kristin Kobes Du Mez*  
Reviewed by Christine Albertini
- Baranzan's People: An Ethnohistory of the Bajju of the Middle Belt of Nigeria* 47  
*By Carol V. McKinney*  
Reviewed by Jeremy McNabb

*Kindred: Neanderthal Life, Love, Death and Art* 49  
By Rebecca Wragg Sykes  
Reviewed by Megan Stueve

*Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* 51  
By Patrick Brantlinger  
Reviewed by Jacob Winn

---

# From Culture to People: Thinking Anthropologically with Jesus and Paul

Johannes Merz

---

The culture concept has been crucial to anthropology. Yet, I argue against its use. I examine how Jesus and Paul interacted with, and focused on, people and contend that we shift our attention from culture to people. Human diversity and difference should no longer be categorized into different cultures as relative, bounded and divisive units. Rather, we should view it as an integral part of humanity's commonality. Shifting our attention to people as cultural beings also means a move beyond a preoccupation with knowledge by embracing practical, reflexive, and ontological engagements with others. It is only when we try to understand specific people's diverse perspectives and the way they see themselves and the world, that we can take them seriously. This opens up anthropology, both at a theoretical level and by collaborating with other disciplines, including theology.

---

## Introduction

Jesus and Paul were not anthropologists. They could not have been, since anthropology—at least as an academic discipline—was only invented during the late nineteenth century. Yet, Jesus and Paul demonstrated an astute awareness of their complex multicultural and multilingual societies. Their words and actions, as recorded in the New Testament, show that they reflected on social, cultural and religious issues, challenged conventions and authority, and deconstructed identities, both their own and those of others. This permitted them to focus on people regardless of their diverse backgrounds. In this, Jesus' and Paul's thoughts and practices model for us how to think anthropologically remarkably well.

I find no evidence in the New Testament that Jesus and Paul used the word "culture," nor the anthropological concept associated with it. This contrasts with Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer's observation that "[t]he word 'culture' is probably the single most central concept in twentieth-century anthropology" (2010, 168). Today, however, anthropology is shifting towards studying humanity and humans in all their diversity by focusing on people rather than culture.

In this article, I discuss the rise, fall, and persistence of the culture concept in academic anthropology, as well as its popularization in other academic disciplines and among the wider public. Originating from the convergence of Romanticism and the Enlightenment, the idea of culture became one of the first concepts of

academic anthropology and thus shaped the new discipline's conceptual and methodological approach. More recently, however, the culture concept has been widely discussed and contested. I argue in line with many other current anthropologists that we should limit ourselves in using the idea of "culture" to a broad and descriptive sense by only using it as an adjective or adverb. This means that we need to shift our attention away from culture as a concept towards the question of what it is to be human. Cultural diversity and difference remain part of anthropology's focus, but rather than considering them as relative in cultural terms, I propose to root them in human commonality by following the example set by Jesus and Paul. In other words, we are different from each other because we are humans.

Rodseth noted that anthropology's culture concept has "proven to be exceedingly complex" (2018, 399). We simply cannot do without generalizations when talking about culture and anthropology more generally. While I criticize the culture concept for its generalizing stance, I do so for its potentially divisive and relativizing impact. The problem with generalizations is that they are never neutral, since we use them to highlight some aspects at the expense of others. In this sense, most of this article is concerned with how I think we should generalize about culture, diversity, difference, and humans, while seeking to avoid the pitfalls and concerns of earlier approaches.

I start by discussing how anthropologists established their new discipline in opposition to other disciplines, notably theology. This provided the basis on which the culture concept could develop. I then sketch the history of the culture concept from its origins to it becoming the central concept of American anthropology in the early twentieth century. It was this period that was most important in shaping the culture concept, leading to its popularization in other academic disciplines as well as among the wider public.

With the crisis of representation in anthropology of the 1980s, scholars started to question and debunk the culture concept. Although “culture” had been useful to think and talk about human difference in general terms, many anthropologists now considered it deeply flawed. People too easily reify and essentialize “culture” so that it dominates humans, which results in generalizations and stereotypes. The culture concept, then, created the divisions between people that anthropologists sought to understand and overcome. In spite of such critique, “culture” continues to be a popular concept among some anthropologists, in other academic disciplines, such as theology, and especially among the wider public. I then turn to Jesus and Paul to examine how they dealt with diversity and difference by focusing on people.

In the last section, I pull the different strands of the argument together, contending that current ontological anthropology provides a framework for anthropologists to focus on people and to take them seriously by relationally and reflexively engaging with them. By deconstructing and debunking the culture concept and its divisive boundaries, we can rid ourselves of dichotomies and divisions that have plagued anthropology as a discipline. I am not suggesting that we should abandon the important and valid *idea* of culture when used as an adjective to describe human difference and diversity. By doing so, we shift our focus to taking people seriously as cultural beings, as we find them, and how they see themselves. This includes their conceptual ideas, which should not only supply anthropology with data but also inform theory and contribute further to the discipline at all levels. Such developments should also promote collaboration with other disciplines, such as theology.

## **Establishing Anthropology against Theology**

Fascination with human otherness may be as old as humanity itself, but it was only during the late nineteenth century that European scholars moved from describing otherness to analyzing and explaining it systematically and theoretically, notably through the culture concept. This marked the beginning of academic anthropology, which—like other scientific disciplines—has its roots in Christian theology.

Following the collapse of the Roman Empire, Christian priests and monks maintained Antiquity’s intellectual and philosophical heritage by pursuing their theological interests. During the Middle Ages monasteries and cathedral schools developed from centers of learning into universities, paving the way for Europe’s academic and scientific development.

The age of exploration piqued a renewed interest in human diversity with explorers, traders, missionaries, and later colonialists starting to document their observations of human otherness. More systematic and philosophical reflection on humanity, especially in terms of its origin and nature, however, remained part of theology. Anthropology as an academic discipline distinct from other academic disciplines only developed much later, as a result of the “the ongoing secularisation of European intellectual life, the liberation of science from the authority of the Church, and the relativisation of concepts of morality and personhood” (Eriksen and Nielsen 2013, 7). These developments culminated during the nineteenth century in European academics establishing “scientific unity via an opposition between ‘science,’ now fully identified with reason, and ‘religion,’ increasingly associated with faith or perspectival belief” (Josephson-Storm 2017, 60).

The time was now ripe for Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) to be appointed first as reader in anthropology at Oxford University in 1884, then as professor of anthropology in 1896 (Eriksen and Nielsen 2013, 30–31; Larsen 2014, 13–36; J. D. Moore 2009, 5–17). While anthropology had been in the making for a while, its first professorship marked a crucial step in establishing it as a scientific discipline.

Through the emerging scientific paradigm based on the idea of evolution, early anthropologists positioned themselves in opposition to the rest of the world (Abu-Lughod 1991, 139) and adopted a strong anti-religious—and often anti-Christian—position (Larsen 2014, 9, 30). Accordingly, many early anthropologists, including Tylor, rejected the faith of their parents and “assumed that theology and anthropology were incompatible, competing modes of thought rather than potentially complementary or mutually enriching ones” (Larsen and King 2018, 51). This attitude has underpinned anthropology ever since and came to define disciplinary boundaries based on the question of God’s existence: “Christian theology could not function without belief in God, while anthropology operates perfectly naturally without it” (Davies 2002, 1). Anthropologists have tried to approach the subjects of their study without preconceived ideas by ridding themselves of what they perceived to be any form of subjectivity, particularly religion, that appeared to hinder scientific neutrality and objectivity as they studied those who were different. Anthropologists used this self-relativizing stance also to

set themselves apart from other academics and their disciplines, notably theology.

Anthropology's separatist, self-relativizing and anti-religious stance shaped the discipline's development in significant ways, sometimes to its own detriment. Larsen and King (2018) recently documented how early anti-religious anthropologists rejected biblical accounts and thus declared Genesis a myth. This led them to embrace a polygenetic origin of humanity, which they justified through the human diversity they observed. Their position, however, was never accepted in anthropology and has since been fully refuted by geneticists, who affirm the biological unity of humanity (Engelke 2018, 168–169).

This example shows how early anthropologists were not only contrary; they actively tried to establish and legitimize their new discipline as a distinctive and valid science, often by explicitly demarcating it from their perceived subjectivity of religion and theology. Anthropology did indeed become a small but respected and respectable discipline, in spite of its short history plagued with problems and controversies (see, for example, Eriksen and Nielsen 2013; J. D. Moore 2009).

The idea of culture as an analytic concept was maybe the most important anthropological innovation. Culture came to be for anthropology what God is for theology: “the concept can be better understood as part of a belief system” (J. H. Moore 1974, 537). In due course, the culture concept proved so successful that it moved beyond the discipline's boundaries and has become an important part of everyday vocabulary. Today, it is so ubiquitous that hardly a day goes by when I do not hear the word “culture” at least once outside strict anthropological circles, be it in the news and other media, socializing with friends, or in my work for SIL International, a faith-based NGO.

While I welcome a heightened awareness of cultural issues in wider society, the culture concept—both in its anthropological and popularized form—comes with serious issues that I see rooted in anthropology's origins. Culture's usefulness and limitations continue to be debated in current anthropology, with more skeptical voices debunking the concept behind it. Robert Brightman observed “that the culture concept has been flawed from its inception” (1995, 509; see also, Engelke 2018; Rodseth 2018), an observation that deserves a more thorough examination and evaluation in the light of anthropology's history.

## Anthropology and the Culture Concept

The idea of culture in anthropology can be traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), and the convergence of Romanticism with the Enlightenment.

Anthropology inherited an interest in cultural wholes from Romanticism, while the Enlightenment contributed its analytical, comparative and classifying approach (Eriksen and Nielsen 2013, 15).

Tylor starts his book *Primitive Culture* (1871) with anthropology's first and most influential definition of culture mainly by drawing on Romantic ideas: “Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1871, 1). Tylor never pluralized culture (Barnard and Spencer 2010, 170), thus presenting it as an inclusive but vague abstract whole that has often been criticized for defining everything yet nothing specific.

Franz Boas (1858–1942), of Jewish German origin, introduced anthropology to America. He was familiar with Herder's ideas about culture, picked up Tylor's definition of culture and drew on early anthropologists' self-relativizing and anti-religious stance. Yet, he was never interested in theorizing culture and hesitantly presented a coherent view of it with an essentially Tylorian definition towards the end of his career (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952, 45, 151). His main contribution to the culture debate was to counter the view of his time that culture was an expression of race and would evolve. He did so by coining the idea of cultural relativism, by which he meant that “without relativising your own culture, you can have no hope to understand another” (Eriksen and Nielsen 2013, 60).

Several of Boas' students such as Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Alfred Kroeber, continued to develop and formalize the idea of culture, turning it into “the central concept of anthropology” (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952, 36). Like Boas, they advocated Tylor's Romantic ideas about culture, but also developed the concept's Enlightenment legacy. While they viewed culture as an expression of behavior, their main innovation was to propose that cultural differences between societies could be expressed in terms of different cultures. Having pluralized culture, it now served anthropologists as a classificatory, analytic and comparative idea to conceptualize difference. Culture thus became anthropology's main object of study, especially in America.

Boas and his students were aware that the culture concept could lead to generalizations. While they stressed the importance of treating cultures as wholes, they also viewed each culture as distinct. This is why they thought it was important to study each specific situation in detail with the aim of finding the patterns and configurations that characterized different cultures. Each culture deserved to be described minutely and methodically, which was particularly important in view of many small-scale societies whose cultures appeared to be threatened by colonization, imperialism, and

globalization. Studying the culture of a specific people thus became a kind of “salvage ethnography” (J. D. Moore 2009, 62, 67) with the aim of preserving what soon would be lost.

The last important anthropologist whose ideas about culture were influenced by the Boasians was Clifford Geertz (1926–2006; Rodseth 2018, 406–407). He further developed the culture concept by viewing the idea of culture in terms of meaning, rather than behavior. He proposed a refined and more focused, yet abstract and semiotic, meaning-based definition, which treats culture as if it were a literary text. For him, culture is “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (1973, 89). Culture as a system of meaning and symbols thus helps people to make sense of the world they inhabit, as they live out their lives within it.

Geertz’s take on culture reinforced the concept’s Enlightenment legacy and further stressed difference and alterity between cultures to the extent that different cultures become defined by their distinctiveness. Thus, it is only within the limits of a specific culture that people’s behavior, beliefs, and practices become meaningful, rendering it “unknowable to the etic [outside] observer, since the meanings are only obtainable from the emic insider’s point of view” (J. D. Moore 2009, 228). In this sense, Geertz foreshadowed the “crisis of representation” (Marcus and Fischer 1986) that led to efforts to debunk the culture concept.

Many anthropologists outside of America were also skeptical about the culture concept. In British anthropology, for example, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) famously dismissed culture as “a vague abstraction” (1952, 190) and preferred to focus on studying society instead. This led to British social anthropology being distinguished from American cultural anthropology, even though both traditions remained part of the same discipline. Indeed, the difference between culture and society has not always been obvious and the two notions tended to be used synonymously (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952, 36).

A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1952, 36) acknowledged that the culture concept took time to be established as a general idea. Culture, in its anthropological sense first introduced by Tylor (1871), only appeared in Webster’s dictionary in 1929 and in the 1933 supplement of the Oxford dictionary. By 1940 the educated anglophone public started to use it (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952, 33, 35). Especially Benedict’s and Mead’s work contributed to the popularization of the culture concept. Some of their books (for example, Benedict 1934; Mead 1928) had become classics and

still count among the most widely read anthropological works today.

Scholars of other disciplines also took up the culture concept and applied it to their disciplines, including theology (Carson 2008; Gorringer 2004; Nehrbass 2016; Niebuhr 1951) and missiology (Meneses 2009; Merz 2020). Such efforts resulted in a significant and lasting contribution that established the concept well beyond anthropology.

Scholars of various disciplines, and the wider public alike, currently seem to use the culture concept even more copiously than ever before. They often take culture as a given and talk about it rather vaguely in order to generalize differences between people and societies. In doing so, they reinforce both the Romantic idea of cultural wholes and the Enlightenment traits of classification and demarcation. Both scholars and the general public, then, have accepted the culture concept much more readily than many anthropologists, who continue to discuss and often contest it.

Despite its popularization—or maybe because of it—anthropologists took the culture concept increasingly to task and by the 1990s “successfully discredited the old notion of ‘a people’ sharing ‘a culture’” (Eriksen and Nielsen 2013, 202) and a language (Schwartz 2018), while occupying a specific delimited space (Gupta and Ferguson 1992).

In hindsight, the culture concept has never been as romantic or enlightening as it initially appeared. Having been embraced by the wider public, however, it continues to prove hard for anthropologists to counter the ever-popular concept. This being the case, I think it is important to revisit how anthropologists critique and deconstruct the culture concept in more detail.

## Debunking the Culture Concept

As part of the crisis of representation in anthropology during the 1980s, the landmark book *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) “was received as a single-minded assault on the dominant concept of culture” (Eriksen and Nielsen 2013, 180). Coming from the perspective of literature criticism, scholars looked at how anthropologists represented the people and societies they studied and thus also paid attention to the culture concept. James Clifford observed: “‘Cultures’ do not hold still for their portraits” (1986, 10), thus questioning the value of documenting a culture in the face of the perpetual changes that contemporary societies face. He continued: “If ‘culture’ is not an object to be described, neither is it a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted. Culture is contested, temporal, and emergent” (Clifford 1986, 19).

Clifford set both the tone and the agenda for the culture concept’s deconstruction and later debunking,

questioning both the concept's Romantic and Enlightenment roots and thus identifying it as an ideological construct. The attack was broad, ranging from simple questions of how the culture concept deals with change, or the fuzzy distinctions between societies, to deeper and more fundamental questions of how the culture concept affects the way we think about those who are different. It is these latter foundational ideas that I continue to explore.

Roger M. Keesing pointed out that the culture concept "almost irresistibly leads us into reification and essentialism" (1990, 48). In other words, it invites us to treat culture as if it were an object or thing that we can study, learn, know, and compare. This divides humanity into different cultures, which are seen as being bounded, distinct, uniform, and thus demarcated from each other.

Having been reified, culture can apparently be animated and transformed into "a living being or something developing like a living being" (Brumann 1999, 2). Keesing observed that he hears "colleagues and students talk as if 'a culture' was an agent that could *do* things" (1990, 48, emphasis in original). While I worked on this article, I came across many examples—both in academic and popular discourse—that treated culture as an actor that perceives, assumes, values, encourages, rejects, invests, creates, tells, dictates, spends time, and even worships, believes, and thinks, and so on. In doing so, culture displaces humans from anthropology's center of attention, takes on their agency, and then dominates and determines their lives.

Reifying and claiming to know a culture easily leads to essentialism, which is the assumption that a culture allows us to know the people who are thought to be part of it. Especially in the popularized use of the culture concept, this easily results in stereotypes, which come to define whole "cultures." Some common popular stereotypes are, for example, that Americans are ignorant, that Mexicans are lazy, that Muslims are terrorists, that Africans are animists, that Amazonian Indians are oral, and that the Middle East has a shame culture (Merz 2020). People who do not conform to stereotypes can then easily be ignored and even stigmatized. Today, anthropologists readily recognize that even small-scale societies are simply too complex to make valid generalized statements like these. Despite this, reducing social complexities to the idea of a single culture remains attractive, especially in popular discourse, since this provides easy labels and the means to talk about difference. To do so, however, fosters a silo mentality that goes back to the advent of academic anthropology.

People commonly use essentialized stereotypes to compare, value, and judge others, usually by setting them apart, more often negatively and depreciatively than not. In this sense the culture concept is also

ideological, political and hegemonic (J. H. Moore 1974; Rodseth 2018; Schwartz 2018). While I do not see the culture concept as the cause of stereotyping and generalizing others—people have always done this—I do think that people use it to legitimize these activities. Similarly, the essentializing tendencies of the culture concept resulted in its penetration to the core of anthropological theorizing, often with anthropologists not sufficiently recognizing it. The way people have used the culture concept thus systematically contributed ideas and rationales that facilitated some of the most tragic events in human history, such as colonialism, the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, as well as widespread contemporary racism and xenophobia. Historically linked to nationalism and language (Eriksen and Nielsen 2013, 16–17; Schwartz 2018), people have used an essentialized culture concept not only to discredit those who are different, but also to create unity and patriotism in order to bolster their own position.

The way the culture concept works is that those who draw on it use their language and associated concepts as an authoritative basis from which to approach and study those who are different (Brumann 1999, 2). Having identified and abstracted a group of people as a culture, it can then be studied from a detached distance by analyzing it in terms of difference. This is done through an act of interpretation from within the established academic discourse determined by the culture concept (Kahn 1989, 11), rather than through observation (Silverstein 2005, 103, 111). In other words, we use the culture concept to seek to understand difference by making it conform to our way of thinking. This then clouds how we comprehend others and the way they see and understand themselves.

As a result of using the culture concept, we then gain the impression that we understand human difference better, thereby reinforcing how we think and see ourselves in opposition to those who are different. While this seems to make otherness easily accessible, and can produce insights about other people's ways of life, anthropology's culture concept actually becomes "the essential tool for making other" (Abu-Lughod 1991, 143). The culture concept is thus essentially divisive, even if we employ it positively by seeking to promote understanding across cultures.

The culture concept, then, digs the trenches it seeks to bridge. Together with cultural relativism it has regularly pushed anthropologists to stress difference and alterity sometimes to the extent of concluding that different cultures are incommensurable. In other words, different cultures came to be seen as so distinct that it was inconceivable to see and accept any commonality between them. This kind of hyper-relativism then inevitably questions the unity of humanity and the possibility of effectively engaging with



people when doing anthropological research. With this, the culture concept—at least as it was developed by the Boasians—caves in on itself.

## Culture Today

Even though many anthropologists raised issues about the culture concept and debunked it, others like Christoph Brumann (1999) or Carola Lenz (2017) argue for its continued use in anthropology more or less unchanged. In practice, most anthropologists recognize both weaknesses and strengths of the culture concept and many seek to navigate a middle ground. So crucial has the idea of culture been to anthropology and the wider world that most anthropologists are not willing to let go of it completely. Rodseth observes: “‘Culture’ is still with us, . . . but in a greatly modified and perhaps diminished form” (2018, 399).

In order to maintain the benefits behind the idea of culture, but reject the generalizing, reifying, and essentializing stance of it as an ideological concept, Keesing (1990, 57) suggested that we avoid the noun culture, while Brightman (1995, 501) proposed to continue using it as an adjective (or adverb). This pragmatic self-limiting use of “culture” has since gained traction (Barnard and Spencer 2010, 175; Brumann 1999, 3–4; Engelke 2018, 51; Merz 2020, 136; Silverstein 2005).

Avoiding culture as a noun means that we withdraw from Enlightenment ideas that influenced the Boasians’ culture concept, while retaining some of the Romantic notions. Thus, we no longer need to constrain the complex, dynamic, and fuzzy idea of cultural wholes by providing definitions, which are always deficient and contestable. Matthew Engelke (2018, 25), for example, is not willing to define culture as a concept, but he recognizes that we need to describe what we mean in order to retain the notion’s usefulness. Good and succinct descriptions have already been provided in the past, for example by James P. Spradley: “Culture . . . refers to the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior” (1979, 5). I find Engelke’s description, which echoes Geertz’s definition, also helpful: “Culture is a way of seeing things, a way of thinking. Culture is a way of making sense” (2018, 27).

In practice, when we consider using the word “culture,” we first need to ask if there is not a better, more precise word that could take its place. Anthropology has always had a much wider, more nuanced and flexible conceptual repertoire to fall back to in order to explain difference and diversity. Such alternatives to culture include society, community, identity, worldview, life, custom, heritage, thought, discourse, ideology, and people. Words and ideas like these not only avoid the danger of reifying,

essentializing, or animating the idea of “culture,” they actually help us to communicate ideas more clearly. When we think that the word culture would be justified, we should consider an adjectival expression instead, such as cultural environment, cultural background, cultural issue, cultural change, or cultural feature. Such adjectival expressions that attribute “culture” to other nouns help us to be more precise in our vocabulary choices and avoid sweeping generalizations.

Whether anthropologists continue to use the culture concept in a more limited way or avoid it altogether, they have more often than not neglected to address the historical basis of anthropology’s inherent separatist and othering stance. This does not only concern the culture concept, but also many other areas that anthropologists deal with, including how we often think today about the concept of religion, for example by demarcating it from secular science, as well as distinguishing anthropology from theology. Debunking the culture concept may be a worthy exercise, but actually moving beyond it or finding constructive solutions to dealing with an orphaned culture concept is a different matter. I suggest that we challenge the divisions and antagonisms that have shaped anthropology and look for inspiration towards the discipline’s nemesis, theology.

## Theology and the Culture Concept

During recent years theology and anthropology saw a hesitant but fruitful rapprochement, as scholars argued for better cooperation between the two related disciplines (Bielo 2018; Davies 2002; Fountain 2013; Meneses and Bronkema 2017; Merz 2019; Merz and Merz 2017; Lemons 2018; Robbins 2006). This became possible thanks to the widely recognized failure of secularization theories and the turn to post-secularism, which questions and addresses the artificial divide of the secular and the religious.

This rapprochement, however, has not yet led to theology joining anthropology in questioning the validity and usefulness of the culture concept as such. Rather, systematic theologians have often adopted the culture concept from anthropology together with its deep-seated issues. Accordingly, these theologians continue to use the culture concept to reinterpret the biblical message and church history.

Some systematic theologians have specifically applied the culture concept to theology, mainly to discuss how Christians relate to culture (Carson 2008; Gorringer 2004; Nehrbass 2016; Niebuhr 1951). Others have gone further by comparing theological and anthropological approaches to culture (Flett 2017), while more anthropologically minded Christian scholars have engaged with the concept more deeply,

also by drawing attention to its shortfalls (Meneses 2009).

Generally, theologians have maintained a more ambivalent relationship to the culture concept when compared with anthropologists. While systematic theologians recognize that culture is “of fundamental theological concern” (Gorringe 2004, 3), opinions differ as to whether it is an essentially human idea that, “like every other facet of creation, stands under the judgment of God” (Carson 2008, 75), or whether “culture is God’s idea” (Flett 2017, 209). Kenneth Nehrbass goes even further by claiming “God’s nature as a cultural being” (2016, xix) in the sense “that culture is rooted in the very nature of God” (2016, 62). What theologians have in common is that they “emphatically emphasized the unity of the human race” (Larsen and King 2018, 51) and thus never accepted cultural relativism to the extent of incommensurability, as has sometimes been the case in anthropology.

While systematic theologians have come up with interesting ways of applying the culture concept to theology, I do not think that they have sufficiently addressed the issues that have since been raised by anthropologists. Despite this, turning to biblical theology shows promise. Kroeber and Kluckhohn point out that biblical authors “showed an interest in the distinctive life-ways of different peoples” (1952, 3). This raises the question of how they did this and what both anthropology and a culturally minded theology could learn from looking at how Jesus and Paul dealt with the issue without using the word culture, which was only coined relatively recently.

## Jesus and Paul on Human Diversity and Difference

The Bible is a collection of diverse texts of different genres, written by different people at different times and in different places, and different cultural environments. It is in itself an example of diversity, which has its origin with God and has been part of humanity from the very beginning: “God created mankind in his own image, . . . male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27, NIV).<sup>1</sup> Adam and Eve’s children showed economic diversification with Abel being a shepherd and Cain a farmer (Genesis 4:2). Then, the *Table of Nations* (Genesis 10) demonstrates that humanity spread across the region and diversified through the development of different languages, social and political structures. God cares for all people, regardless of their origins, since through Abraham’s “offspring all nations [ethnic groups] on earth will be blessed” (Genesis 22:18, NIV).

Human diversity is a theme that runs through the Bible right to Revelation, where we read that “there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language” (7:9, NIV). This means that cultural diversity—as we might call it today—is an important, integral and valued part of humanity from creation to the last book of the Bible. Such diversity and difference, I need to note, have never been easy to handle, as anthropology’s discussion of the culture concept demonstrates. Often, diversity and difference lead to strife, conflict, and crime, especially when people lose sight of their shared human commonality and pursue their own self-interest.

Among humanity’s growing diversity, the Israelites developed as a people and nation with an identity founded on God. They constantly struggled to maintain cohesion and unity as they sought to set themselves apart for God and from other peoples. Yet, they also demonstrated an openness to diversity, as illustrated by Moses’ Cushite wife (Numbers 12:1), Ruth, the Moabite whom the Israelite Boaz married (Ruth 4:9), or Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute who joined the Israelites with her family (Joshua 2).

As God having become human, Jesus adopted an essentially anthropocentric stance (Flett 2017, 209). Jesus was born into a Jewish family with a genealogy that shows evidence of diversity (Matthew 1:1–17). He was clearly familiar with his complex multicultural and multilingual environment, in which he consciously challenged and disrespected social, religious and cultural identities, authority, boundaries, and conventions when needed. He associated with different outcasts, including prostitutes, lepers, and tax collectors, and interacted with non-Jews when opportunities presented themselves. Whether separatist Samaritan (John 4:4–26), immigrant Greek (Mark 7:25–30) or occupying Roman (Luke 7:2–10), Jesus treated people first of all as persons, created in God’s image, even though he was well aware of their social, cultural, and religious differences. Jesus thus recognized what others may refer to as “culture,” but he avoided the potentially divisive nature of difference by focusing his attention on people.

Various relationships with God and between humans are more often than not marred by human diversity and difference. Jesus calls us to love others as we love ourselves (Luke 10:27), and even to love our enemies (Luke 6:27–31), whom we often perceive as radically different. Jesus thus presents love as the practical action that should bring different people together and lead at least to an acceptance, if not appreciation, of human diversity.

<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® NIV®, Copyright © 1973 1978 1984 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Saul's experience on the road to Damascus—"the model of Christian conversion" (Robbins 2010, 637)—was as much a turn to Jesus' anthropocentric approach to humanity, diversity and difference as it was an inner spiritual reorientation. Through "a process of relational transformation" (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 260; Hurley 2018), Saul turned from a hater of difference and persecutor of Jesus-followers into Paul, a loving servant to humanity in all its diversity. He followed Jesus' example of affirming our shared humanity stemming from creation (Acts 17:26; Larsen and King 2018, 50), while recognizing diversity, which was evident in wider society as different people led their lives differently.

Paul's mission, in a nutshell, was to restore humanity's relationship with God, now made possible through Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection. The ideal of unity and cohesion founded on their relationship with God, with which the Israelites constantly struggled, now extends to all humans. God made this possible by tearing down the ultimate barrier between himself and humanity and immersing himself in human diversity and difference by becoming human in Jesus. His life, words, and deeds revealed how human diversity was both inevitable and necessary, while his death and resurrection made the new-found unity of all humanity possible. Prior barriers between Israelites, Greeks and Romans were no more. Paul uses the image of a body to show how this unity works in all its diversity (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). Each member of a community has something unique and valuable to contribute to the group.

Paul, like Jesus, was born a Jew and never denied his roots. Following Jesus, he sought to embrace diversity in unity by questioning ethnic identities and by disentangling himself from his own background:

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. . . . I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some (1 Corinthians 9:19-22, NIV).

The critical event that validated Paul's views was the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-21). Paul insisted that non-Jewish Jesus-followers did not need to fulfill Moses' law and be circumcised, which meant that they did not need to become Jews and take on a Jewish identity before being accepted as Jesus-followers. Paul

thus freed his message from culturally specific restraints by focusing on the relationship of the One God with humanity. This made it possible for the movement of Jesus-followers to spread easily across social, cultural, religious, and geographical boundaries (Robbins 2010, 648). Christianity thus became a global and transnational movement distinguished by its translatability (Sanneh 2009).

Given that the culture concept is relatively recent, there is no Hebrew or Greek equivalent for the word "culture" in the Bible. Despite this, the anthropological and divisive ideas behind it might have been part of the mindset of Saul, the persecutor of Christians. But I think it opposes the message of Jesus and Paul. They did not see diversity and difference as part of what we call "culture" today, but rather rooted in human commonality as created by God. Such unity in diversity is a basis for any kind of relationship and engagement with others, both theologically and anthropologically. It is equally the basis for communicating, sharing our lives with others, and engaging in relationships. In doing so, we should lovingly and humbly focus our attention on people and—even if we do not always agree with others—we should abstain from hasty judgements and expect diversity and difference in how we think, act, communicate, and live as part of being human.

We may not think of Jesus and Paul as anthropologists, but their thoughts and lives demonstrate a high level of social and cultural awareness and what I call the ability to thinking anthropologically (Merz 2019). Like early anthropologists, they questioned and challenged their backgrounds and relativized themselves in order to be better placed to focus on other people and understand them and their thoughts and actions. Current anthropologists refer to this as reflexivity or "the ability to think about thinking" (Evens, Handelman, and Roberts 2016, 2) and view it as an essential tool to address concerns brought to light during the crisis of representation, and to address issues relating to the culture concept (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Lichterman 2017; Salzman 2002).

Furthermore, Paul, more than Jesus, actively engaged in deconstructing divisions and dichotomies, and especially the idea of different identities. For Paul: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28, NIV). This kind of deconstructive activity has been another central outcome of the crisis of representation and the debunking of the culture concept, whether it concerns us and them, subject and object, male and female, the secular and religious, modern and traditional, or spirit and matter (Eriksen and Nielsen 2013, 132, 177, 186, 201; Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Holbraad

and Pedersen 2017, 46–48; Josephson-Storm 2017; Merz and Merz 2017; J. D. Moore 2009, 334).

When it comes to the question of culture, I see Jesus and Paul in line with anthropologists who argue for debunking the culture concept. The example set by Jesus and Paul, I suggest, appears remarkably current and pertinent to contemporary anthropology. Had the word “culture” existed, I do not think they would have used it as a central analytical concept, subscribing neither to Romantic nor Enlightenment philosophy. Their message is not about building nations and barriers, but rather about tearing them down as part of establishing the kingdom of God. Their focus on people demonstrates that we not only need to keep human commonality and diversity in balance (Merz 2019, 3), we also need to root diversity in unity.

Taking Jesus’ and Paul’s anthropocentric approach as a starting point, I propose that we should shift our anthropological attention from studying the abstract and contentious concept of culture back to people (or *anthropos*) as anthropology’s main topic. While this does not mean that we need to give up on the *idea* of culture, it does require that we relinquish the culture concept, which is rooted in Enlightenment ideologies.

## From Culture to People

The Enlightenment roots of the culture concept resulted in people aiming to describe and classify cultures, or, in other words, seeking to *know* cultures in an epistemological sense. Consequently, people ask what a culture is, how it is characterized or patterned, and what distinguishes one culture from another. In shifting our attention to people, we can take a similar approach and ask what a human is and how different people lead different lives, and think, communicate, and act differently.

We should, however, go a step further, as Bronislaw K. Malinowski already proposed in 1922 before the culture concept was widely popularized. For him—in the language of his time—the goal of anthropology is “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world” (1922, 25, emphasis in original). Anthropology, then, is more than a cognitive activity resulting in knowledge and concepts. More importantly, doing anthropology is to practice empathy towards people, and communicate and engage with them in relationships, so that we can put ourselves in the place of our counterparts. This begs the general question of what it is to *be* human in all our diversity, which requires a different kind of thinking that is embedded in action and relationships, and thus has an ontological focus.

Ontological anthropologists shift their attention from culture to ontology, by which they understand “the investigation and theorization of diverse experiences

and understandings of the nature of being itself” (Scott 2013, 859). Knowing about others by learning about different “cultures” is not sufficient to take people themselves seriously. Rather we should also study who people are and seek to grasp their perspectives on the world and how they think, act, and lead their lives. In doing so, we should abstain from limiting ourselves to our own theories and concepts, such as the culture concept, but seek to theorize on the basis of our counterparts’ experiences (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007). Furthermore, opening up anthropology to different epistemological and ontological views, and thus to different ways of thinking and living, is essential for anthropologists from diverse social, cultural, and religious backgrounds to be able to contribute to the discipline without being restrained by culturally and ideologically limited concepts, such as culture (Merz and Merz 2017, 11).

For Martin Holbraad and Morten A. Pedersen, ontological anthropology is above all a “methodological project that poses ontological questions to solve epistemological problems” (2017, 5). Their main question is: “How do I enable my ethnographic material to reveal itself to me by allowing it to dictate its own terms of engagement, so to speak, guiding or compelling me to see things that I had not expected, or imagined, to be there?” (2017, 5). This requires a personal investment through a deep engagement with people who sometimes appear radically different—and even repugnant (Harding 1991)—to us. In doing so we need to relativize ourselves through reflexivity as much as we reflect on our counterparts (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 9–10; Merz 2019, 4–6). The locus of such an engagement can be called the ontological penumbra and is the shady area “where the self and the other, belief and disbelief, ignorance and certainty, possibility and impossibility, . . . meet, overlap and intertwine” (Merz and Merz 2017, 9).

At this point we catch up again with Jesus and Paul, who also had an ontological agenda. They showed love and empathy to people regardless of diverse origins and backgrounds, listened to them and sought to understand them. They refused to accept their own social and cultural backgrounds as the ultimate standard and always kept the idea of a human commonality based on God’s image in focus. If we do not root human diversity and difference in our shared humanity, we continue to face the challenges of incommensurability and hyper-relativism that results from overemphasizing radical diversity and alterity.

As has been the case with the culture concept, critics of ontological anthropology have pointed out that the idea of ontology can also result in a view of ontological uniformity and boundedness of a specific group of people, and ultimately lead to the idea of separate multiple ontologies (Harris and Robb 2012). Ontology

can go as far as “discard[ing] the notion of shared humanity” (Vigh and Sausdal 2014, 54), thus doubting that we are even able to “connect to incommensurable worlds, and translate them into understandable anthropological text” (Vigh and Sausdal 2014, 57; see also, Harris and Robb 2012; Scott 2013).

As is the case with culture, to view ontology as a form of radical alterity or difference can lead to a hyper-relativism that reifies and essentializes ontology thereby raising the question whether “ontology is just another word for culture” (Venkatesan 2010). In order to avoid such a development—as with culture—we should also avoid employing ontology as a noun and use it as an adverb or adjective instead (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 11). Ontological anthropology, then, provides not so much a conceptual as a methodological reorientation to the discipline by refocusing the questions we ask on and about people.

We are then left with the most basic ontological question that anthropology can ask, namely “what it is to be human” (Toren 2002; see also, Eriksen 2010, 197; Eriksen and Nielsen 2013, 203, 219; Merz 2019, 2; 2020, 136; Merz and Merz 2017, 2). Having said this, anthropology does not—and should not—have a monopoly on this question, since it shares it with other academic disciplines, including theology (Maston 2018, 2). Anthropology’s particular contribution to the study of humans is to examine and seek to understand the human diversity we find in different places, times, and relationships, and how people think, communicate, and engage with each other, God, and, in a wider sense, the surrounding world. Anthropologists seek to focus on how different people see themselves, including the possibility of discovering what we cannot anticipate or imagine.

In studying people, we should abstain from dehumanizing them by analyzing and subsuming them under “culture” (or “ontology”) and thus othering them by making them conform to our ideas of what culture is and does. “Culture” cannot—and should not be used to—define humans. Rather, it is our diverse and different ways of life through which we engage with each other and the world around us that shape our various social and cultural environments, as much as these shape us. In this sense, humanity’s shared predisposition for diversity and difference means that “the human being is essentially a social being, and therefore an irreducibly *cultural being*” (Flett 2017, 214, emphasis in original; see also, Merz 2019, 4; Wason 2017, 14).

While I consider it imperative to give up on the Enlightenment idea of culture as a noun and defining concept of anthropology, I am happy to use the word as an adjective or adverb. Current anthropology shows that this can help us describe, discuss, and understand human diversity and difference. This, in turn, affects the

way we behave, communicate, and live out our lives with each other, God, and in the world we all inhabit.

This brings me back to the beginning of this article. Shifting our attention from culture to people has wide-ranging and deep implications. It does not only come with a methodological shift towards ontological anthropology, it also means a breaking down of Enlightenment oppositions, barriers, and dichotomies. Anthropology should no longer maintain its early anti-religious and separatist stance through the conceptual and ideological basis of culture, but accept the important and valid idea of culture when used as an adjective to describe humans in all their diversity. This places anthropology in a position where it can converge with theology and other disciplines through the idea of cultural diversity and difference being rooted in human commonality. In this way, anthropology opens itself up in ways hardly possible before.

This paves the way for deeper collaboration across disciplines with similar concerns and questions. Even though anthropology and theology continue to have different approaches, focuses and agendas, both take humanity as their main concern and are thus “equally interested in human flourishing” (Bielo 2018, 33). It is on this basis that further collaboration could—and should—develop.

## Conclusion

The vast diversity and alterity of humanity we observe in today’s world may appear to be cultural in nature, but rather than conceiving of them in terms of different cultures, we should root them in humanity’s commonality. I explore this idea by looking at Jesus and Paul and how they dealt with issues of diversity and difference. Their approach of tearing down barriers and deconstructing identities as a reflexive engagement with themselves and others is a manner of anthropological thinking that I find remarkably current. By focusing on people regardless of their social, cultural, and religious backgrounds, Jesus’ and Paul’s approach further aligns with the current preoccupations of ontological anthropology. Jesus and Paul, then, help us to move the discipline’s focus back to people (or *anthropos*) in all their social and cultural diversity and difference.

The shift from culture to people comes with both conceptual and methodological changes. Conceptually—and in line with current anthropology—we should reject the culture concept given that it is a specific ideological construct that makes people other by dividing them into bounded units. Instead, we should consider using wider, more nuanced and flexible vocabulary to help us understand and talk about diversity, such as society, community, identity, and worldview, and adjectival expressions such as cultural

environment, cultural background, cultural issues, and cultural features. Furthermore, anthropology needs to embrace epistemological, ontological, and religious ideas of difference that stem from outside the discipline as part of theorizing and doing anthropology. Methodologically, anthropology can no longer limit itself to cognitive knowledge, but must also embrace practical, reflexive, and ontological engagements with others. This helps us to take people seriously by seeking to understand who they are, as well as the way they see themselves and the world.

Taken together, these conceptual and methodological reorientations open up anthropology to people from all social, cultural, and religious backgrounds so that they can engage in the discipline and contribute novel ideas and thus diversify anthropology's theoretical repertoire. Similarly, this will help anthropology move beyond the limits of its own ideological views and concepts, and to collaborate with disciplines that have similar preoccupations, such as theology, by contributing its expertise on cultural diversity and difference.

Today, with the debunking of the culture concept, many anthropologists no longer document the cultures of people groups as wholes. They rather study what it is to be human in specific situations and how people relate to each other and the world around them. It is only once we seek to grasp other people's diverse perspectives, and put our feet into their shoes, that we can contribute to the overarching question of what it is to be human, both particularly and generally. After all, anthropologists are not that different from theologians in wanting to see people flourish in their various relationships with each other, the world around them, and maybe even with God.

## References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1991. Writing against Culture. In *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*. Richard G. Fox, ed. Pp. 137-162. Santa Fe, CA: School of American Research Press.
- Barnard, Alan and Jonathan Spencer. 2010. Culture. In *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, second edition. Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer, eds. Pp. 168-176. New York and London: Routledge.
- Benedict, Ruth. 1934. *Patterns of Culture*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Bielo, James S. 2018. Anthropology, Theology, Critique. *Critical Research on Religion* 6 (1): 28-34.
- Brightman, Robert. 1995. Forget Culture: Replacement, Transcendence, Relexification. *Cultural Anthropology* 10 (4): 509-546.
- Brumann, Christoph. 1999. Writing for Culture: Why a Successful Concept Should Not be Discarded. *Current Anthropology* 40: 1-27.
- Carson, D. A. 2008. *Christ and Culture Revisited*. Norton Street, UK: Apollos.
- Clifford, James. 1986. Introduction: Partial Truths. In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds. Pp. 1-26. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Clifford, James and George E. Marcus, eds. 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Davies, Douglas J. 2002. *Anthropology and Theology*. Oxford and New York: Berg.
- Engelke, Matthew. 2018. *How to Think Like an Anthropologist*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 2010. The Challenges of Anthropology. *International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education* 1 (3): 194-202.
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland and Finn Sivert Nielsen. 2013. *A History of Anthropology*, second edition. London: Pluto Press.
- Evens, Terry, Don Handelman, and Christopher Roberts. 2016. Introduction: Reflexivity and Selfhood. In *Reflecting on Reflexivity: The Human Condition as an Ontological Surprise*. Terry Evens, Don Handelman, and Christopher Roberts, eds. Pp. 1-20. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Flett, Eric G. 2017. Trinity: Conceptual Tools for an Interdisciplinary Theology of Culture. In *On Knowing Humanity: Insights from Theology for Anthropology*. Eloise Meneses and David Bronkema, eds. Pp. 209-221. London and New York: Routledge.
- Fountain, Philip. 2013. Toward a Post-secular Anthropology. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24 (3): 310-328.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gorringe, T. J. 2004. *Furthering Humanity: A Theology of Culture*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Gupta, Akhil and James Ferguson. 1992. Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference. *Current Anthropology* 7 (1): 6-23.

- Harding, Susan. 1991. Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other. *Social Research* 58 (2): 373-393.
- Harris, Oliver J. T. and John Robb. 2012. Multiple Ontologies and the Problem of the Body in History. *American Anthropologist* 114 (4): 668-679.
- Henare, Amiria, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell. 2007. Introduction: Thinking Through Things. In *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*. Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, eds. Pp. 1-31. London: Routledge.
- Holbraad, Martin and Morten A. Pedersen. 2017. *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hurley, Jill. 2018. Understanding Christian Conversion as a Post-Relational Ontological (Re)turn to Relations. *On Knowing Humanity Journal* 2 (2): 1-8.
- Josephson-Storm, Jason A. 2017. *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Kahn, Joel S. 1989. Culture: Demise or Resurrection? *Critique of Anthropology* 9 (2): 5-25.
- Keesing, Roger M. 1990. Theories of Culture Revisited. *Canberra Anthropology* 13 (2): 46-60.
- Kroeber, A. L. and Clyde Kluckhohn. 1952. *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. Cambridge, MA: The Museum.
- Larsen, Timothy. 2014. *The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Larsen, Timothy and Daniel J. King. 2018. The Dependence of Sociocultural Anthropology on Theological Anthropology. In *Theologically Engaged Anthropology: Social Anthropology and Theology in Conversation*. Derrick J. Lemons, ed. Pp. 50-65. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lemons, Derrick J., ed. 2018. *Theologically Engaged Anthropology: Social Anthropology and Theology in Conversation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lentz, Carola. 2017. Culture: The Making, Unmaking and Remaking of an Anthropological Concept. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 142 (2): 181-204.
- Lichterman, Paul. 2017. Interpretive Reflexivity in Ethnography. *Ethnography* 18 (1): 35-45.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw K. 1922. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Kegan Paul.
- Marcus, George E. and Michael M. J. Fischer. 1986. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Maston, Jason. 2018. Introduction. In *Anthropology and the New Testament*. Jason Maston and Benjamin E. Reynolds, eds. Pp. 1-4. London and New York: T&T Clark.
- Mead, Margaret. 1928. *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation*. New York: Blue Ribbon Books.
- Meneses, Eloise and David Bronkema, eds. 2017. *On Knowing Humanity: Insights from Theology for Anthropology*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Meneses, Eloise Hiebert. 2009. The Birds of the Air: The Christian Challenge to Culture in Defending the Marginalized. *Missiology: An International Review* 37 (3): 369-384.
- Merz, Johannes. 2019. Thinking Anthropologically for the Theologically and Missiologically Engaged. *On Knowing Humanity Journal* 3 (2): 1-13.
- . 2020. The Culture Problem: How the Honor/Shame Issue Got the Wrong End of the Anthropological Stick. *Missiology: An International Review* 48 (2): 127-141.
- Merz, Johannes and Sharon Merz. 2017. Occupying the Ontological Penumbra: Towards a Postsecular and Theologically Minded Anthropology. *Religions* 8 (5): 1-17. <http://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/8/5/80>. Accessed 28 April 2017.
- Moore, Jerry D. 2009. *Visions of Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists*, third edition. Lanham, MD: Altamira Press.
- Moore, John H. 1974. The Culture Concept as Ideology. *American Ethnologist* 1 (3): 537-549.
- Nehrbass, Kenneth. 2016. *God's Image and Global Cultures: Integrating Faith and Culture in the Twenty-first Century*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.
- Niebuhr, H. Richard. 1951. *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Radcliffe-Brown, A. R. 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society: Essays and Addresses*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Robbins, Joel. 2006. Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship? *Anthropological Quarterly* 79 (2): 285-294.
- . 2010. Anthropology, Pentecostalism, and the New Paul: Conversion, Event, and Social Transformation. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109 (4): 633-652.

Rodseth, Lars. 2018. Hegemonic Concepts of Culture: The Checkered History of Dark Anthropology. *American Anthropologist* 120 (3): 398-411.

Salzman, Philip Carl. 2002. On Reflexivity. *American Anthropologist* 104 (3): 805-811.

Sanneh, Lamin. 2009. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, second edition, revised and expanded. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Schwartz, Saul. 2018. The Predicament of Language and Culture: Advocacy, Anthropology, and Dormant Language Communities. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 28 (3): 332-355.

Scott, Michael W. 2013. The Anthropology of Ontology (Religious Science?). *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (4): 859-872.

Silverstein, Michael. 2005. Languages/Cultures Are Dead! Long Live the Linguistic-Cultural! In *Unwrapping the Sacred Bundle: Reflections on the Disciplining of Anthropology*. Daniel A. Segal and Sylvia J. Yanagisako, eds. Pp. 99-125. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Spradley, James P. 1979. *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Toren, Christina. 2002. Anthropology as the Whole Science of What It Is to Be Human. In *Anthropology Beyond Culture*. Richard G. Fox and Barbara J. King, eds. Pp. 105-125. Oxford and New York: Berg.

Tylor, Edward B. 1871. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, two volumes. London: John Murray.

Venkatesan, Soumya, ed. 2010. Ontology Is Just Another Word for Culture: Motion Tabled at the 2008 Meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory, University of Manchester. *Critique of Anthropology* 30 (2): 152-200.

Vigh, Henrik Erdman and David Brehm Sausdal. 2014. From Essence Back to Existence: Anthropology Beyond the Ontological Turn. *Anthropological Theory* 14 (1): 49-73.

Wason, Paul. 2017. The Difference Culture Makes. *On Knowing Humanity Journal* 1 (1): 14-24.



**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](mailto:johannes_merz@sil.org)



---

# Individuals, Structures, and Human Agency in Community Development

Mike Mtika

---

Community development, especially in developing societies, has focused on mobilizing community members for collective action. Little attention has been paid to creative efforts of individuals engaged in transformative activities that improve their lives and from which other members of a community can learn. This paper examines how individuals creatively engage in activities that improve their households. The research, done in a rural area of northern Malawi, Africa, involved in-depth unstructured qualitative interviews of a number of individuals and careful observations of what was going on in their households. The analysis reveals evidence that creative individuals improved their households' well-being through meaning-making, learning, and acting while navigating structural imperatives. Some of their actions were counter to social and cultural expectations, others were behavioral outliers, but all were driven by choices each made. Community development facilitators ought to consider identifying creative individuals (could be Christians) in a community, enhancing their agency, and organizing communities of practice around these individuals for other members of a community to learn from or for them to engage in the spreading of the Good News. I term this constructivist community development / evangelism and argue that it is particularly relevant in subsistent, substantive, and allocentric communities where group norms are a significant factor in people's behavior. These group norms are important for collective action but can stifle individuals' creativity.

---

## Introduction:

Community development aims at improving the lives of people in a community and the community itself. To a large extent, the process of community development has involved community development practitioners mobilizing community members to act collectively to deal with their common concerns. I refer to this as the conventional community development practice.

This conventional practice of community development fails to acknowledge the important agentic role of individuals, many of whom engage in creative activities. The influence of these individuals in contributing to development in a community is invaluable. Their role is an uphill battle in that in their action they have to take into consideration the demands of various structures in their socio-cultural environment; these structures can compromise their agency. This is probably the case more so in subsistent and substantive communities. These communities are subsistent in that people heavily depend on natural resources and physical labor to meet their livelihood needs. They are substantive, as Polanyi (2001) defines the term, because non-market-based reciprocity, redistribution, and exchange, rather than

market-driven, rational-choice decision-making processes that are responsive to price mechanisms, characterize community members' socio-cultural and economic behavior. In these subsistent and substantive communities, socio-cultural processes are significantly allocentric; people tend to be organically collaborative, interdependent, define themselves in terms of the groups they are a part of, and behave more so according to group norms (see Triandis et al. 1985, and Triandis and Trafimow 2003 for definition of allocentrism). In such communities, one's well-being and dreams of improving one's life are heavily linked to collective expectations; one's choices are influenced by collective norms. Allocentrism is good for conventional community development practice. However, allocentric behavior can stifle individuals' agency and their God-given potential in the pursuit of their goals. Community development facilitators would do well to identify agentic individuals in a community, encourage them in their life-improving creative endeavors, then mobilize other members of communities to learn from these community members through what Wenger (1998) and Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) term communities of practice, that is, groups of people

learning from one another in pursuing goals. This is reminiscent of house churches, Bible Study Groups, fellowship meetings, and various Christian groups engaging in some collective group activities where converts receive the much needed support to grow in their faith and are encouraged to live a victorious life in Christ.

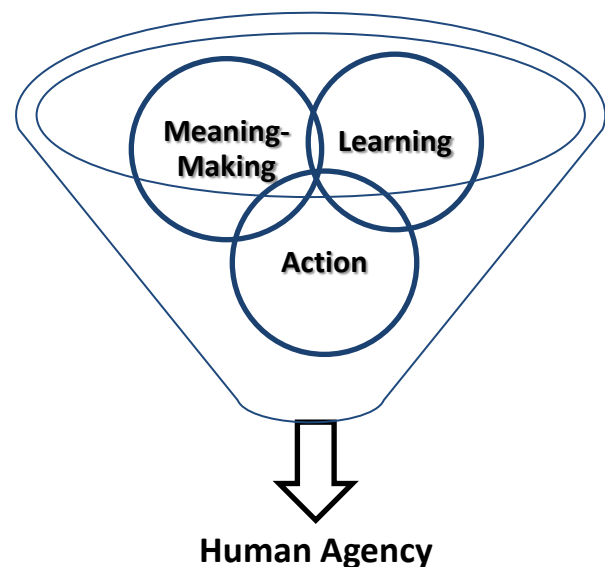
I first explain human agency, self-efficacy (a springboard of agency), and structures positing them as critical concepts in creative action and the use of God's gifts. I propose that when individuals' agency does not blindly follow allocentric behavior but involves individuals being creatively entrepreneurial (thinking outside the box) in their behavior to improve their well-being, the individuals engage in what I have termed constructivist transformative human agency. The community development (and any evangelism activity) that results is constructivist; it emerges from life-improving creative endeavors, which transform well-being in the households involved. The research focused on documenting transformative human agency and the emerging changes in households in the four contiguous rural communities in northern Malawi, Africa. I explain how the research was carried out starting with a description of the socio-cultural environment in the communities where the research was done to document allocentrism. Thereafter, I explain how the interviews and observations were undertaken. In my analysis, I draw on exemplary case studies of a few individuals to demonstrate their transformative agency and the emergent improvements in their households. I argue that creative individuals deploying their self-efficacies and negotiating socio-cultural structures in their efforts to improve their household's well-being can be encouraged to engage in communities of practice. This is an effective way of individuals fully applying God's gifts to attain what is best for their families. Such communities of practice would be loci for community development directed at transforming well-being in households and for spreading the Gospel.

## Human Agency, Structures, and Self-Efficacy

Human agency refers to individuals in a given social environment choosing to act in response to a situation or to address an issue, a problem, to take advantage of an opportunity, or to just fulfill a social responsibility. Agency has the 'effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs' (Giddens 1984, 14). The human agency process is constructivist; it involves meaning-making, learning, and acting feeding into each other as represented in Figure 1. Individuals engage in negotiation of meaning in any given situation, learn or acquire knowledge from each other, reflect on the knowledge, and use the knowledge in doing something in the process initiating further negotiation of meaning.

I would argue that what Ledwith (2005, 41) terms praxis, "the synthesis of reflection and action undertaken through critical consciousness or the making sense of the world in order to transform it" is transformative human agency involving meaning-making, learning, and action. I draw on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and practice to shed light on Ledwith's argument and on what I see as constructivist community development. Further, I argue that meaning-making, learning, and acting are foundational not only to community development but also to evangelism or the spreading of the Good News.

**Figure 1**  
**Human Agency:**  
**Meaning-Making, Learning, and Action**



Meaning-making is about the making sense (what does this imply, portend, or entail) of events, situations, new information, relationships, experiences, and even one's self. Thus Ignelzi (2000, 5) notes that meaning-making is "the process of how individuals make sense of knowledge, experience, relationships, and the self [personality, character, or identity]". The 'making sense' is a process in which meaning is negotiated. The negotiation of meaning encompasses (a) participation of those involved in some interaction and (b) reification or asserting the meaningfulness (relevance, significance, or consequential qualities) of a situation (Wenger 1998, 52-62). Advertently, meaning-making is linked to learning (acquiring knowledge) and practice or action (using the knowledge). Thus meaning-making as a process inherently has those engaging in meaning-making learning, then doing something, if so inclined,

about or with the knowledge gained. The whole meaning-making, learning, and action is influenced by one's self-efficacy, that is, an individual's belief in his or her ability to achieve or accomplish a task (Bandura 1977). Part of the reason is that agency is "associated with notions of freedom, free will, action, creativity, originality, and the possibility of change through the actions of free agents" (Barker and Jane 2016, 280–281).

It is important to note that while agency involves acts by individuals, the individuals are not "self-constituting—they do not bring themselves into being out of nothingness" (Barker and Jane 2016, 281). Individuals are social products; they are products of their socio-cultural environment (Berger and Luckmann 1966, and Callero 2018). Agency is thus socially and culturally produced in that agents are part of social systems, which Giddens (1984) defines as the reproduced relations between agents. Agency, Giddens informs us, is a reflection of lived-through experience embedded in, influencing and being influenced, and enabled and being constrained by structures.

Structures can be cognitive, cultural, and social. White (1979) defined cognitive structure as "the knowledge someone possesses and the manner in which the knowledge is arranged" (3). Cognitive structure engenders the pattern of thought, aptitude, reasoning, perception, or understanding in individuals. Garner (2007, 2) views cognitive structure as "the basic mental processes people draw upon to make any sense of information." It inheres in knowledge, skills, talents, aptitudes, and an awareness of one's socio-cultural environment, which dialectically influences the pattern of thought as well as the attitudes, beliefs, values, desires, dreams, and dispositions individuals attain. The cognitive structure hence has foundational influence over agency. In his social cognitive theory, Bandura (1989 and 2001) developed a model of emergent interactive agency. He argued that cognitive and other personal factors, behavior, and environmental situations interacted and influenced each other. Agents' behavior was influenced by personal factors (cognitive, affective, and such others) and environmental events. Agency, Bandura argued, is thus neither an autonomous product of personal factors nor simply a product of environmental influences but an emergent outcome of personal factors, environmental events, and behavior. The environment is of course the arena,

domain, realm, or field for cultural and social structures.

Hall (2000) provides an insightful definition of cultural structure. He first defines cultural meanings. These are "the invented, received, synthesized, reworked, and otherwise improvised idea-patterns by which individuals and social groups attach significance to their actions" (341). The cultural structure, according to Hall (2000, 341), is the "patterned logic with identifiable generic features that comprise diversely situated cultural meanings." The cultural structure refers to patterns of beliefs, habits, styles, conventions, traditions, and rituals in the socio-cultural environment; these form the springboard of cultural meanings (what a particular cultural element means and entails) and the actions or practices informed by these meanings. Cultural meanings thus guide cultural practice, what somebody is supposed to do in any given circumstance (Miller and Goodnow 1995). As Swidler (1986) argues, culture is a tool kit for people's actions; culture informs how people act.

Following Bandura's (1989; 2001) argument, personal factors (such as cognition) arouse individuals' agency which, I would argue, is normatively legitimated or justified by the cultural structure and enacted through the social structure. Giddens (1984) defines the social structure as rules and resources or sets of transformation relations organized as properties of social systems where social systems, as stated before, refer to the reproduced relations between agents or actors. Social structure thus comprises the patterns of relationships or social network of ties between actors connected to each other through positions or statuses through which they perform roles following rules (which change based on social situations) and utilizing resources available to the agents. Human agency is enacted through these social networks of ties, legitimated by culture, and given credence through the cognitive structure. An individual's human agency is thus informed by the cognitive structure. It is in response to the position the individual has. It is enabled or constrained by the rules and resources appertaining to the position an individual has in society; it is affirmed by the ability, inclination, and willingness of an individual to act in a way the individual thinks he or she should. As Giddens (1984) informs us in his structuration theory, agents produce and reproduce social structure<sup>1</sup>. I would add that agents produce and reproduce cognitive and cultural structures.

---

<sup>1</sup> There is significant scholarly discussion on the autonomy of individuals in their agency versus the influence of the structure (social) over the individuals' agency. I do not get into this debate here. Instead, I have aligned my thinking with Giddens' duality of structure argument. In this view, structures (not only social but also cultural and cognitive in my opinion) have some constraining and enabling influence over individuals' agency. I (arguably) take Archer's (1982) morphogenesis argument, that society has no particular pre-set form or preferred state and that structures take their form from the intended and unintended consequences of agents' interactions and activities, as basically providing more insight about structuration (action enabling and constraining) processes.

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and practice help us to understand the nature of production and reproduction of cognitive, cultural, and social structures. Bourdieu (1977, 72) defines habitus as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions [a way of being or a habitual state], structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations." Habitus is a structuring mechanism operating from within individuals. It enables them to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations. Habitus operates at both the mental and socio-cultural environmental levels. It is thus a "socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures, and the socially structured situations in which the agents' interests are defined, and with them the objective functions and subjective motivations of their practices" (Bourdieu 1977, 76). Individuals thus draw upon and transform structures in that lived experience is structured and structures perception and action. An individual can, within limits, transform the world by transforming its representations because structures (mental/cognitive, cultural, and social) are recursively linked in practice (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Individuals or agents thus produce and reproduce structures and "may or may not be aware of the reasons that cause their behavior" (Bhaskar 2015, 80-81). In fact, there is a "dialectical interplay between structure and action" (Archer 1982, 458).

The human agency activities of meaning-making, learning, and acting rouses individuals to deploy their self-efficacies (a cognitive matter) in undertaking an action while taking into consideration the demands of the cultural and social structures in one's socio-cultural environment. Agency can be of a routine nature (very traditional) in that individuals carry on business as usual: how things are done follows how things were done in yester-times. It can also be entrepreneurially transformative, that is, can depart from the business as usual practice. Transformative human agency can either involve creative actions that are not common in a community or actions, also creative, that counter socio-cultural expectations but both with the objective of improving one's well-being. The research explored this transformative human agency, that is, individuals engaging in meaning-making and learning that lead to emergent action to improve their well-being. The research basically explored how individuals engage in constructivist learning, meaning-making, thinking, and acting to improve their household's well-being.

## The Research and its Findings:

The research aimed at finding innovative individuals (in the research communities) who have engaged in constructivist human agency and have improved their household's well-being. It further explored how the individuals were able to achieve goals and how they could be reference points of communities of learning and practice. The research was undertaken in communities served by Pamoza International, a non-profit Christian outreach and community development organization, during my two separate trips to the area Pamoza was serving. The first of these visits was in June-July 2013 and the second in June-July 2014<sup>2</sup>.

Pamoza International operates among the *Tumbuka* people in northern Malawi, Africa. The *Tumbuka* are patrilineal and patrilocal. Families are organized around a clan leader, the oldest male with his sons and their families living together in a contiguous stretch of houses. A clan thus comprises grandparents, fathers, mothers, uncles, sons, daughters, cousins, and nephews helping each other with food, labor for farming or building anything, clothes, and a whole range of other items. A clan or several of them make up a village.

The area served by Pamoza International at the time comprised four communities covering 37 villages with a total population of about 6,000 in 1,100 households. A household is responsible for taking care of its members (meeting food, clothing, healthcare, education, and other needs) but is expected to help relatives within the extended family system or clan. The resulting family networks are channels for material (money, clothing, food, etc.) and non-material, mainly labor, exchanges. These exchanges are massive networks of what Coleman (1988) called social credit slips. These slips are a fundamental factor of allocentrism since they are used to enforce social norms in people's behavior. Clan leaders play a key role in ensuring that households follow stipulated norms in their behavior. When there is death in a family, for example, all members of a household (except children) have to attend and bring, as a household, something to help the grieving family. The only acceptable reason for not attending is sickness, old age, or being away. Failure to observe this socio-cultural expectation attracts heavy sanctions including shaming individuals and their households.

Normative behavioral expectations extend to other matters. Constructing an improved house for your family, for example, involves checking with your parents and the clan leaders who must approve the

<sup>2</sup> I have been involved with the organization since 2011 as its founder, board member, and currently its Director of Field Operations. My work with the organization has also involved research on various matters including contiguity of the community development process (Mtika and Kistler 2017).

project before you start it. One may not be allowed, as another example, to marry from certain clans just because members of such clans are believed to be lazy people or that they practice witchcraft. Individuals thus have to grapple with what is the expected and appropriate behavior in any situation in their agency or meaning-making, learning, and acting.

As part of its community development practice, Pamoza International documented types of houses, their assets (land, livestock, oxen, ox-carts, bicycles, furniture, food reserves, etc.), and their main means of livelihood for each of the 1,100 households of which 78 were well-to-do. To learn how people grappled with socio-cultural expectations in their agency, I, with the help of two research assistants, visited all the 78 households with the objective of building case studies to document how they improved their well-being status. I zeroed in on four households, which I visited several times interviewing the head of the household and observing how members of the households encountered and dealt with the cultural and social expectations in their attempts to advance their well-being. The interviews were unstructured and allowed extensive discussion with the interviewee (the head of the household, basically male), other members of the household, and others in the community who knew the household. Analysis involved bringing forth key issues and themes pertinent to agency in the household. The case studies of four households—Hima, Samu, Remo, and Sijere (the names are pseudonyms)—reveal insights about agency in the households, that is, actions household members engaged in to improve the well-being of their households.

### *1. Hima: Pursuing Opportunities*

Hima, like any other man among the Tumbuka, sees himself as the primary breadwinner for his household. Hima followed the footsteps of his father; he became a migrant worker. Hima's father died at 63 years old. He had engaged in circular migrant work in which he would be in South Africa for two to three years, then return for a vacation of two months, going back to South Africa for another two to three years of work (Mtika 2007; 2015). He did this for a little over 40 years, basically all his working life. Hima was only 11 years at the time of his father's death.

Though he followed his father's footsteps in being a circular migrant worker in South Africa, Hima behaves very differently. To start with, his father, during his two months vacations, would share whatever he brought with various relatives in his clan. Connecting with members of his extended family was very important to Hima's father. The bicycle, work-oxen, ploughs, and ox-carts he had acquired over the years were available to all members of his clan; they used them at no charge.

All this brought a lot of honor to Hima's father. Unlike his father, Hima sparingly shares his resources with anyone else other than his wife, children, and mother. Asked about why he sparingly shares his resources with others in the clan, he remarked:

I am not sure why you have to go to South Africa and work so hard then spread what you have earned to many mostly able-bodied people. This only encourages them to expect you to provide for their needs. They need to be responsible for their own welfare. They should have personal goals and should pursue those goals instead of expecting others to take care of them.

Asked whether he tells people about his views, he responded:

No, why should I? By not giving them anything, they should know that I do not condone their expectation that I have to give them something. Moreover, most of us young people in my clan are working in South Africa and earning something for our families. The people who need our help are parents because they are old and cannot go to South Africa and work especially when it is your mother who has no way, being an old woman, of going and working in South Africa.

Hima's sisters, like other relatives, complain that he provides little help to them and rarely visits them when he is on vacation. He indicated that he visits them when he hears that they or a member of their household is ill and if there was death in their household or clan. "Vacation time [just as much in length as was his father's] is too short; there is little time to spare on unnecessary things," he remarked. He has specific projects for every vacation. In one of the vacations, he was building his house, a modern three bed-room, iron-roofed, and cement-floor type. He has recently installed solar power to the house (there is no grid electricity in the community) so that he can watch videos when he wants to. He has bought a lot of cattle, which he hopes to use in whatever way that advances his household's economic status. He is building a house at a Trading Center some seven miles away from his village. He hopes to rent it out, and thus earn some income.

While he comes home for his vacations once every two years, his wife visits him in South Africa about twice every year. His mother never visited his father in South Africa. His mother is not happy with this arrangement. Many other older folks in his clan and communities are very much against this practice but the younger ones have no problem with it. Hence, while Hima was the first in his clan (and community) to invite his wife to come and visit him in South Africa, a number of other

migrant workers in his age-group have had their wives visit them in South Africa. Asked why he invites his wife to visit him, Hima remarked, “unless one is willing to either have another wife in South Africa [his father had one in South Africa] which would be very expensive or to engage in sex with other women in South Africa to relieve himself, a dangerous thing to do in this era of the sexually transmitted AIDS disease, one must invite his wife.” He indicated that he can live away from his wife for some months but needs to connect with her after a couple of months. During these visits, his wife is also able to bring back other resources needed in the many projects the household engages in.

## 2. Samu: Engaging in Diverse Means of Livelihoods

Samu and his wife Kete are in their thirties. Samu reached the eighth grade in school but his wife attained the tenth grade. Asked why he was unable to go far with school, Samu sadly replied,

You have to be selected in grade eight for secondary [high] school; you cannot go to secondary school without being selected. I was not able to pass well enough in grade eight to be selected to go to secondary school. After several attempts, I stopped.

Samu got married after trying several times to go to high school and failing. Samu’s father was a migrant worker and engaged in circular migration to South Africa. He died in South Africa like Hima’s father. Unlike Hima, Samu did not follow the footsteps of his father. Instead, he invested the resources his father had accumulated into farming. He produced significant surplus and sold the surplus produce generating significant income. He also learned to be a bricklayer and is being hired by other households to build their houses. He used his bricklaying skill and built himself a three-bedroom house. He then uses the income from farming and construction of other people’s houses to buy farm produce and livestock (mainly cattle and goats) from other people, which he resells at a profit. This has enabled him to accumulate much more income, some of which he invested in a bank and earns interest. Realizing that mobility in his selling of produce and cattle is important, he bought a motor cycle which he uses to supervise those who are either trekking his cattle or goats to some market or those helping him to sell his farm produce at trading centers.

Samu is financially secure not from migrant work but from diversifying his means of livelihood. He is into farming, buying and selling farm produce from other farmers then selling the produce at a profit, buying and selling livestock (cattle and goats), and building people’s houses. In terms of character, Samu has avoided the “over-drinking problem that most of his age mates

engage in” as he put it. His treatment of his wife and the whole family also differs significantly from the way his age mates treat their wives and children. When you find Samu at home, he is helping his wife with household chores and spends significant time with his child, a three year old daughter. Asked about his views on family, Samu indicated that his wife is actually his best friend. The two have become an example of a loving family who care for each other and share responsibilities in raising their child. Unlike many other households in the community, Kete knows how much money they have and how it is being used. She trusts her husband and is very sure that he “does not run around with other women as other husbands of my friends do” as she put it. Samu and Kete have engaged in family planning practices. They are not rushing into having another child. Kete actually practices birth control such that they can delay pregnancy until the two think it is time to have another child.

Samu is jovial and extremely friendly as well as helpful to others who ask him for views on how they can improve their households’ economic status. Asked about why he thinks his friends are not doing what he is doing, he said, “it may be because what I am doing is hard work that demands creativity and sacrifice of sleep . . . many times we have to start the day so early in the morning to follow up stuff . . . many may not be willing to do this.” Samu is an example of what Remo, now in his seventies, would like many of the young men in his community to be doing.

## 3. Remo: Confronting Past Unhelpful Behavior

Like Hima’s father, Remo was a migrant worker to South Africa. He did not accumulate any wealth out of migrant work and stopped being involved in circular migration when he was in his 40s. Back home, he trained as a carpenter through local apprentice opportunities. He is not a professional carpenter but provides rudimentary carpentry services when requested and gets paid some “good money” as he put it.

Remo has built an improved three-bedroom house with burnt bricks, cement floor, and iron roof. During one visit, he told me that it was all because of the training he attended that was organized by Pamoza International. In this training, a Pamoza Community Development Trainer talked about the need for the trainees to think about and engage in carefully saving and investing their resources (the focus during the training was on how to best use resources one has). The facilitator told the trainees that most of them probably wasted a lot of their money on beer without knowing how much they are wasting. She called this the “drinking away your money” habit saying “many of you would be surprised to find out how much of your money you are *drinking away* if you wrote down

whatever moneys you are spending on beer.” Remo was one of the trainees. He decided to record how much he was using on beer for about a month. He found the amount of money he could save to be sizeable. He felt bad that he had indeed been drinking away his money and decided he was going to stop drinking, save whatever money he could, and use the money on something worthwhile. He remarked:

I stopped drinking . . . I saved every little penny I earned from my herbalist activities, my selling of sweet potatoes and cassava, and my earnings from my carpentry work . . . Within a year, I saved enough money to buy all the iron sheets and cement that I needed to build an improved house. You know I am a carpenter so I made my own door frames, doors, and window frames. I asked a young man [a bricklayer] to help me build the house. He did and all I did was pay him a goat. Here you see; I have this house.

Remo is very proud of what he has achieved. At every meeting he attends in the community, Remo always advises his fellow villagers, especially younger ones, to seriously think about changing how they use their money. He advises them to have a project and start saving whatever little money they make with the objective of financing their project at some point in time in the future.

#### 4. *Sijere: Dimba Farming for Income Generation*

Sijere is in his sixties. He has many cattle, which he bought with money from farming. He grows enough food to last a whole year and has been a source of help for many food insecure households in that he provides *ganyu*, piece work that one does for payments of money, clothes, or food (Mtika 2015). Many do *ganyu* work at Sijere’s farms for food mostly during times of acute food shortage, December to February, which happen to be times when there is much more demand for farm labor. Sijere thus has access to much more labor (through *ganyu*) at a time he most needs it.

Sijere is busy during the rainy season growing field crops. During the dry season (May to October, a time when there are no rains and a time when many men spend most of their days resting from the hard farming work they engaged in during the rainy season), he is busy with *dimba* work. A *dimba* is a farm near a stream; the stream is a source of water to water the crops grown at a time when there is no rain. Sijere grows various leafy vegetables, onions, and tomato using water from the stream to irrigate his crops. The crops he grows are high cash-value types; he earns a lot of money from them. Thus, Sijere works year-round. He is into farming corn, beans, peanuts, and such other field crops during the

rainy season, December to June. He then gets into *dimba* farming during the dry season months of July to November. He ends up having very little time for anything else including chatting with friends. Asked about working year-round and what he thinks about other men who avoid engaging in *dimba* farming, he explained:

Sometimes you have to take a lonely road if you want to make a difference in your life and that of your family. I do not understand why so many men, many of them strong and younger than me, cannot take advantage of all this land and use it during the dry season to grow crops like onions and tomatoes that are always on demand. I have young men who come here to buy tomatoes, onions, some rape and cabbage for their wives! Why they cannot grow these for themselves is beyond me! I guess they are lazy for *dimba* work is arduous.

People respect Sijere for his hard work and for ensuring that his family does not run out of food even when there has been a terrible drought. Most of them find the amount of hard work he invests in farming too much. “Sijere never rests,” a neighbor remarked. When I visited his home, this neighbor told me, “if you want to talk to Sijere, go to his *dimba*.” I did and always met him at his *dimba* when I wanted to talk to him. He reiterated, “this is grueling work; there is no vacation with this work; it demands no rest but that is what good life is about!”

A number of young men are following his example. They have started their own *dimba* farms and have come to realize that to make it they need to invest a lot of time and labor during the June to October rest period. Those who need some rest from the hard work of the rainy season drop out. Only a few are making it but none to the level of Sijere, at least not yet.

### Agency in the Practice of Constructivist Community Development

The case studies reveal individuals’ constructivist agency in the pursuit of their goals. Hima built a big house for his family. As a result, a lot of his age mates who also engage in migrant work have built improved houses although not as big as his. Second, he allowed his wife to be visiting him in South Africa, something that had not been done before by any migrant worker in his community. A number of his age mates have followed the behavior; they have had their wives visit them in South Africa. Third, he did not succumb to socio-cultural expectations of sharing what he earned with a whole range of relatives as his father did. He finds the idea of spreading his earnings among his many relatives archaic. He is all the time looking for ways to

improve his household's well-being. His mother is complaining that her son is outrageous; she complains that he is over-concerned with improving his life even if it is at the expense of other people's feelings. However, she enjoys and appreciates that Hima is not overstretching his benevolence to a whole range of relatives. Hima's behavior has allowed him to give a lot more help to his mother. She has an improved house, something that her husband did not achieve. Hima's behavior has been socially accommodated by his clan. Part of the reason is his dialoguing with age mates, his mother's increasing support, and clan leaders accepting that his behavior does not compromise the well-being of the clan members.

Samu thought of creative ways of investing the resources his deceased father left behind. He first invested in farming and produced significant surplus farm produce. He got into trading his produce moving on to buying and selling other farmers' produce at a profit. He diversified his income-earning ventures to livestock rearing and buying from others, then selling also at a profit. His treatment of his wife and child is different from many other families. As he indicated, he and his wife are partners in their endeavors to improve their well-being and raise a family. In working so cooperatively with his wife, Samu has been ridiculed many times that his wife probably has applied love potion on him. At the same time, he is admired in his community.

Remo has come to realize that he wasted a lot of money in the past on beer. He is on a mission to change the thinking of others about the use of money whatever amount they get. He thinks people should dream of a better life rather than just accepting their present social situation. He is frustrated that people think that they are poor while "throwing away their wealth into beer," as he put it. His advice to people has been "please save whatever you can from the little you earn and invest in a project that will improve your well-being." Remo thinks that his message that people should think of saving their money seems to be falling on deaf ears. Many people younger than he, though, are admiring how this old man has improved his well-being. He is an inspiration to them.

Sijere went against the normative 'rest in the off season' mentality by investing his labor into dimba farming. He is gaining a lot of respect and has been an example to young men. His view of work and rest is very different from other community members. He questions the sensibility of having a five-month dry season (when there is no rain) vacation that most community members seem to just accept as a way of life. While some view Sijere as being imprisoned by his dimba work, many see his hard work paying off. He has a lot of food, cattle, and has been able to have all his children attain some high school education, with some

even getting into college. Many community members admire what Sijere has been able to achieve, and attribute his success to his hard work.

Individuals in the case studies engaged in constructivist transformative agency. They operated within the bounds of structures (cognitive, cultural, and social), which can be enabling or constraining (Giddens 1984). These individuals played a unique role in transforming these structures, and this entailed a certain level of self-efficacy in dealing with their situations (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
**Individuals' Constructivist Agency in**  
**Community Development**



Cognitively, they deployed their self-efficacy, a high level of belief in their capability and desire to do something about their situation (Bandura 1977). They believed in the possibilities of achieving their goals. Bandura (1989) argues that an understanding of external factors, those within the socio-cultural environment, influences an individual's self-efficacy. I would argue that this entails meaning-making (a cognitive process that involves changes in one's thought patterns) and learning while negotiating social and cultural structures, then deciding, if so inclined, to act. Individuals' engagement in such transformative agency thus demands deploying one's self-efficacy (a cognitive matter) to confront one's habitus (dispositions in one's thinking and acting) and venture into new behaviors as one negotiates cultural and social expectations. These individuals do not passively take in knowledge and use it as has been socio-culturally stipulated but challenge the foundations of the routine knowledge claims and venture into new understandings and action.



In engaging in any creative action or practice “defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the *habitus*” (Bourdieu 1977, 78), individuals indeed have to negotiate cultural and social expectations while creatively defying the status quo as Hima did or going beyond the social and cultural behavioral limits as Sijere, Remo, and Samu did. Bourdieu provides a deeper sense of how agency operates. Agency should be regarded as “dispositional”. Wrestling with the socio-cultural expectations, individuals follow a disposition to act in ways that are coherent with the socially structured situations in which the agents’ *interests* are defined. Agency, in this sense, is not exactly routine, but neither is it purely rational; it does not follow the “wisdom” of rational choice theory. It is adaptive and also adapting. It structures structures; it is constructivist. It is the basis for structuring structures to the extent that it pertains not only to agents’ subjective motivations but also to the objective functions of their practices. Agency is thus about constructivist practice.

Practice here can also be viewed as a “way of talking about the shared historical and social [cultural as well] resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action” (Wenger 1998, 5; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). When a group emerges that engages in practice, we have what Wenger and his colleagues call community of practice.<sup>3</sup>

Communities of practice can be facilitated around creative individuals in a community drawing on their self-efficacies to understand the structures in their social environments then engage in transforming these structures (making them more enabling) to their advantage as they engage in practice. Communities of practice become loci for transformation in households. There was evidence of this already going on around the individuals studied. Others are following their behavior. Hence, the innovative individuals and others mobilized around them can be organized into communities of practice. These communities of practice are constructivist in that they arise out of individuals’ creativity, refining their knowledge, then acting. Community Development Facilitators would do well to encourage creative individuals to deploy their self-efficacies to negotiate (or even navigate around) cultural and social structures. Facilitators ought to then mobilize individuals around these innovative ones thus bringing forth communities of practice. I would like to term this constructivist community development. It starts with development facilitators identifying creative individuals.

They could be the very needy or not, they could be Christians, they could be the inquisitive people in a community, or just those very much wanting to make a difference in their lives. Development facilitators ought to then mobilize others around them, then facilitate significant dialogue with and among these members of a community of practice.

Dialogue plays a critical role in community development and the spreading of the Good News. Westoby and Dowling (2013, 21, 22) define dialogue as “a deep, challenging, responsive, enriching, disruptive encounter and conversation-in-context; and also a mutual and critical process of building shared understanding, meaning and creative action.” All four individuals engaged in dialogue with age mates, clan leaders, and various other people they interacted with. Through dialogue, the status quo was questioned, expectations were challenged, meanings were reformed and reified, and structural demands were negotiated. Dialogue itself is transformative (Gergen 2015); it ignites the cognitive process of meaning-making, learning, and acting. It propels individuals to work through cultural structures that inform people’s beliefs, values, and conventions using this as a springboard for legitimating action as Hima did. It challenges individuals to wrestle with social structures that they are a part of with the objective of making these structures more enabling of desired change. Dialogue, as Gergen (2015) tells us, is historically informed because meaning-making, learning, and acting are subject to continuous refashioning influenced by rules and resources over the course of time. It is thus not surprising, to take one case study, that while Hima’s father might have had a difficult time changing cultural and social expectations, Hima had an easier time since socio-cultural demands in 2000s are not as rigid as was the case during his father’s migrant years, the 1950s to early 1980s. Through dialogue, Good News, in the holistic sense, can be shared in these communities of practice.

## Conclusion

I have argued for a constructivist community development approach that involves creative meaning-making, learning, and acting. For members of households, this entails deploying their self-efficacies and negotiating (dealing with, maneuvering, working through) structures which influence people’s creativity.

<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu’s conception of practice covers cultural practice, i.e., one acting following cultural beliefs, values, traditions, or conventions while possibly effecting some change in the culture (Miller and Goodnow 1995). It also applies to social practice, that is, activity located in a group or an institution, which involves agents working towards a goal while taking into account cultural and social situations (Chaiklin, Hedegaard, and Jensen 1999; Smolka 2001). Communities of practice (groups working to achieve whatever goals they have) would thus be engaging in what we could term constructivist transformative cultural and social practices.

Dialogue is at the center of this community development venture. Dialogue enables creative community members to make sense of the world and reflexively act on it in order to transform or change it, an argument that Ledwith (2005; 2016) makes. This demands that community members engage in communities of practice through which the members further engage in constructivist and transformative human agency involving learning from the venturesome individuals and acting following what they have learned (Wenger 1998; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). Through dialogue in these communities of practice, the Good News can be shared. Structures play the role of enabling or constraining community development activities as well as evangelism or the spreading of the Good News.

Structures (cognitive, cultural, and social) are arguably more deterministic of people's behavior in allocentric, subsistent, and substantive communities because of socio-cultural demands for individuals to conform to group norms in their behavior. Emergent community development and the sharing of the Good News in such communities would be confronting allocentric socio-cultural expectations. A critical concern is how to facilitate individuals' meaning-making, learning, and acting, and how to enhance self-efficacies and achieve well-being without fracturing the benefits of allocentric norms which make life in subsistent and substantive communities culturally and socially rich. Stated differently, there is need to avoid cutthroat individualism. This is a particular challenge for the constructivist approach to community development and the spreading of the Good News. More specifically, how can communities of practice enable the rise of beneficial, aka dispositional (from Bourdieu's perspective), allocentric norms, beneficial not to just one but many households' well-being? This is a matter requiring further research and analysis.

## References

- Archer, M. S. 1982. Morphogenesis versus Structuration: On Combining Structure and Action. *The British Journal of Sociology* 33 (4): 455-483.
- Bandura, A. 1977. Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change. *Psychological Review* 84 (2): 191-215.
- Bandura, A. 1989. Human Agency in Social Cognitive Theory. *American Psychologist* 44 (9): 1175-1184.
- Bandura, A. 2001. Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective. *Annual Review Psychology* 52: 1-26.
- Barker, C. and E. A. Jane. 2016. *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. London: SAGE.
- Berger, P. and T. Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Doubleday.
- Bhaskar, R. 2014. *The Possibilities of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences*. New York: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. and L. J. D. Wacquant. 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Callero, P. L. 2018. *The Myth of Individualism: How Social Forces Shape Our Lives*. New York: Roman and Littlefield.
- Chaiklin, S., M. Hedegaard, and U. Juul-Jensen. 1999. *Activity Theory and Social Practice: Cultural-Historical Approaches*. Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press.
- Coleman, J. C. 1988. Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital. *American Journal of Sociology* 94: S95-S120.
- Garner, K. B. 2007. *Getting to "Got It!": Helping Struggling Students Learn How to Learn*. Alexandria: AASCD.
- Gergen, J. K. 2015. *An Invitation to Social Construction*. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Giddens, A. 1984. *The Constitution of Society: An Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hall, R. J. 2000. Cultural Meanings and Cultural Structures in Historical Explanation. *History and Theory* 39 (3): 341-347.
- Ignelzi, M. 2000. Meaning-Making in the Learning and Teaching Process. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 82: 5-14.
- Ledwith, M. 2005. *Community Development: A Critical Approach*. Birmingham, UK: Venture Press.
- Ledwith, M. 2016. *Community Development in Action: Putting Freire into Practice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Miller, P. J. and J. J. Goodnow. 1995. Cultural Practices: Toward an Integration of Culture and Development. *Wiley Periodicals* 67: 5-16.
- Mtika, M. 2007. Political Economy, Labor Migration, and the AIDS Epidemic in Rural Malawi. *Social Science and Medicine* 64 (12): 2454-2463.
- Mtika, M. 2015. Subsistent and Substantive Communities Under Attack: The Case of Zowe in Northern Malawi.

In *Christian Mission and Economic Systems: A Critical Survey of the Cultural and Religious Dimensions of Economics*. J. Cheong and E. Meneses, eds. Pp. 179-210. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.

Mtika, M. and M. Kistler. 2017. Contiguous Community Development. *Journal of Rural Studies* 51: 83-92.

Polanyi, K. 2001. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time*. Boston: Beacon.

Smolka, A. L. B. 2001. Social Practice and Social Change: Activity Theory in Perspective. *Human Development* 44 (6): 362-367.

Swidler, A. 1986. Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies. *American Sociological Review* 51 (2): 273-286.

Triandis, H. C., K. Leung, J. V. Marcelo, and F. L. Clack. 1985. Allocentric Versus Idiocentric Tendencies: Convergent and Discriminant Validation. *Journal of Research in Personality* 19 (4): 395-415.

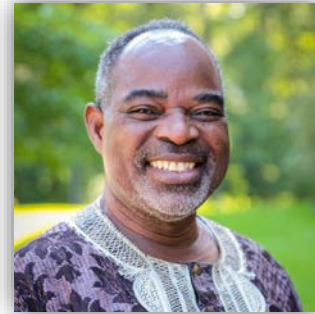
Triandis, H. C. and D. Trafimow. 2003. Culture and its Implications for Intergroup Behavior. In *Intergroup Processes*. R. Brown and S. Gaertner, eds. Pp. 367-385. Malden: Blackwell.

Wenger, E. 1998. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, E., R. Dermott, and W. M. Snyder. 2002. *Cultivating Communities of Practice*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Westoby, P. and G. Dowling. 2013. *Theory and Practice of Dialogical Community Development: International Perspectives*. New York: Routledge.

White, R. 1979. Describing Cognitive Structure. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Australian Association of Educational Research, November 1979, Melbourne, Australia.



**Mike Mtika:** BSc in Agriculture (1978) from Bunda College of Agriculture, University of Malawi, now Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources; MSc in Agricultural Extension and Rural Development from Reading University in United Kingdom (1980); and PhD in Sociology from Washington State University (1998). Expertise in rural and community development. Research focus: (a) political economy of HIV/AIDS and (b) how people draw upon capital to improve their well-being. Worked as an Agricultural and Rural Development Officer in the Ministry of Agriculture in Malawi (1978-1986). Joined World Vision (Malawi) and worked for the organization starting as a Projects Coordinator in 1986 and ending as Technical Services and Operations (Projects) Director in 1991. Currently Professor of Community, Economic, and Political Sociology at Eastern University. Also, Founder and Director of Field Operations of Pamoza International, a non-profit organization involved in Christian Outreach and Community Development in northern Malawi.

Author email: [mmtika@eastern.edu](mailto:mmtika@eastern.edu)

---

# Paul's Teachings on the Uniqueness and Supremacy of Christ in Colossians 1:12-23 and Its Implications for Christianity in Africa

Valentine Chukwujekwu Mbachii and John Uchendu

---

This article examines Paul's teaching on the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ and its implications for Christianity in Africa. The approach is analytical or qualitative. The historical-critical method and contextual tools are used in the interpretation of the biblical text. The study reveals that Christianity in Africa shares similar threats of heresy to that of the Church at Colossae which, of course, holds implications for Christianity in Africa such as: that Christ must be a living reality in one's life without which he/she is not worth being classified as a Christian, that the one professing to be a Christian must not only be rooted in Christ but must be built up in Him as well, that Christians in Africa should realize that when believers are part of the body of which Christ is the head, there is no need to fear or manipulate any other spiritual beings, that subjugated powers cannot harm the person who is in Christ for their ultimate overthrow in the future is assured, that Christians in Africa have no cause to pay homage to any lesser supernatural beings, that Christians are not to follow ceremonies, rituals, initiations and restrictions in order to be saved, that Christians in Africa must not obtain secret or acquire an exoteric knowledge in order to be saved or be liberated from the clutches of evil powers, and that they should shun combining aspects of several religions given that they have everything since they have Christ. This, therefore, spells the need to take Christian discipleship very seriously in African Churches.

---

## Introduction

Africa is perhaps one of the geographical areas that has witnessed the flourishing of Christianity the most in the recent times. Also, owing to various cultural backgrounds and colonial experiences, Christianity in Africa is possibly the most diversified. The missionaries had emphasized the power of Jesus to save the soul from the power of sin, but the power of Jesus which destroys the power of the devil and delivers from all evil spiritual and elemental forces and diseases was not enthusiastically proclaimed. The most urgent need now appears to be the interpretation of the Bible in such a way that the Word will become incarnate (as it were), once again in the language and life of the people of Africa. Thus, while the emphasis has been on enculturation, contextualization or indigenization, there is still a crying need to be concerned about syncretism which is the mixing of incompatible religious ideas and practices. Equally, we need to be concerned about the heresies of syncretism, of the direct and indirect denial of the uniqueness and total adequacy of Jesus Christ, of the denial of the completeness of our salvation in Him and through Him. This is a challenge to Christianity

particularly when the converts to Christianity come from traditional religious background. Paul's letter to the Colossians reflects such a situation. Paul was writing to a young Gentile church that was apparently under the intense pressure to syncretise their new Christian faith by adding elements from other traditions and teachings, including their own past religious experience.

The uniqueness and supremacy of Christ runs like a thread throughout the New Testament. However, for an in depth study, relevant to the issue at hand, and to conserve space, we would like to limit ourselves to Colossians 1:12-23. This article aims to examine the Colossian heresy and see its implications for Christianity in Africa with particular reference to the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ. The historical-critical method and contextual tools are used in the interpretation of the biblical text.

## Issues that Plagued the Colossian Church

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul did not lay out the heresies of the time, but the heretical teachings he was addressing can be identified by considering the responses he gave to them:

(a) First, Paul highlighted the supremacy of Christ, and this emphasis suggests that the false teachers were teaching that the simple truth preached by Jesus and preserved in the gospel was not enough. It had to be filled out by more philosophical considerations. Paul thoroughly rejected these philosophical or fanciful speculations that seek to undercut the high Christology he advocated. He enjoins the Colossians not to quit using their minds, but to focus on Christ as the foundation of their faith.

(b) Paul warned against being deceived by human philosophy, that is, empty human speculations without divine revelation. Likely, he was referring to an early form of Gnosticism, which arose in the second century. The message of the heretics was also that the Colossians were still under the influence of the elemental spirits of the universe, especially of the stars and planets (Col. 2:8, 20). As a result, they needed a special knowledge, beyond that which Jesus could give in order to be set free. Paul taught that when we know Jesus Christ, we don't need to investigate other religions, cults, or unbiblical philosophies. Christ alone holds the answer to the true meaning of life, because Christ is life. He is the unique source for the Christian life. Consequently, no Christian should seek for anything beyond what Jesus has made available.

(c) False teachers were seeking to impose circumcision upon the Colossian Christians. They were teaching that faith was not enough, and that circumcision was necessary for salvation. In other words, a mark in the flesh had to be supplemented to the attitude of the heart. However, Paul counteracted this teaching by telling the Colossians that circumcision is a spiritual act whereby Christ cuts away the old unregenerate nature of rebellion against God and imparts to the Christian his spiritual and resurrection life (Col. 2:11-12). Paul brings it home to the Colossians that circumcision is of the heart.

(d). Errorists wanted to lay down rules and regulations for self-denial. They intended to introduce all manner of dietary regulations about what might be eaten and drunk and about what days to be observed as festivals and fasts. Against the inclusion of Jewish ascetic dietary rules as being necessary for salvation, Paul taught that a Christian is freed from legal and ceremonial obligations of this kind.

(e). The Colossian heretics were seeking to impose the worship of angels on the church (Col. 2:18). They were teaching that Jesus was only one of many intermediaries between God and humans, and that these intermediaries must receive their worship. To Paul, calling on angels would be displacing Jesus Christ as the supreme and sufficient Head of the Church.

Having gone through these issues listed above, two things can be noted: (a) the content of the heresy

appears diverse. It contains a mixture of Jewish legalism, Greek speculation, and the mysticism of the Orient. Perhaps, some of the elements later emerged in fully developed Gnosticism. And, (b) the common thread that is conspicuous in the false teachers' message is that Jesus Christ and his teachings and work were not in themselves sufficient for salvation. As far as they were concerned, Jesus Christ was not sufficient, not unique but merely one among many manifestations of God and it was necessary to know and serve other divine powers in addition to him.

## **Scholarly Views cum Historical Perspective**

The identity of the Colossian heretics has been a difficult problem for New Testament scholarship to solve. Houlden (1970) and Eadie (1979) regard the group as a Jewish sect, but Zan (1970) denies such a connection. Scholars like O'Brien (1982), and Barclay (2009) have tried to root the heretics teachings in some form of early Gnosticism, in Greek philosophy, or in Jewish mysticism, all without full success. Flemming (2005) thinks that the Colossian problem should be seen as a kind of "syncretistic stew made up of a number of religious ingredients" (215). However, in the light of the discovery of the Dead Sea documents, Moule (1968) opined that there may be justification for the comparison of the Colossian heresy with Essenism.

The works of Baur and that of Lightfoot were probably predominant over others in the nineteenth century. F. C. Baur was not only uncertain of the genuineness of the epistle but also dated it after the death of the Apostle Paul. This became a springboard for other scholars to come up with their own contextual convictions. Baur's work led to understanding Christian works in their contextual settings and paved the way for the comparisons between Christianity and non-Christian parallels. In many ways, all subsequent study reacts to Baur; some support him, some modify him, and others oppose him. Lightfoot (1817) saw the problem as an incipient Jewish Gnosticism which characterised the Essenes. The religious and philosophical parallels pointed to an early date for the epistle. The idea of incipient Gnosticism is one that remains viable one hundred years after Lightfoot's commentary.

Scholars in the twentieth-century developed and shaped one or more of these ideas from the nineteenth century. While biblical exegetes like Dibelius (1953) and Lohse (1971) held onto the Gnostic or pre-Gnostic context, others such as Bruce (1957), Bandstra (1974) and O'Brien (1982) clung tenaciously to a more Jewish context. The first major treatise of the twentieth century was written by Dibelius. He studied the Isis initiation in Apuleius and was impressed particularly by a technical use of term *embateuo*, suggesting that Colossians was

addressing a similar initiatory rite. For him, Colossians provided a proof that Christianity had joined with a mystery cult of the “elements” by about A. D. 56. This probably occurred before the time of Paul. Paul’s task, therefore, was to demonstrate the distinction between the cult and Christianity. Many objections arose to Dibelius’ thesis. Dibelius failed to explain the distinctive element of Christianity that made it survive. For him, its survival depended on its restrictedness, but the restricted nature was unexplained.

Later scholars have modified Dibelius’ position. Bornkamm (1948) argues that the problem was Gnosticized Judaism that added pagan elements, including Iranian-Persian elements and Chaldean astrology, and syncretism was the result. Lyonnet (1956) thinks that the terms used to support the ties between Christianity and Gnostic cults occurred outside Gnostic circles as well. Particularly, they often occurred in Jewish (Christian) contexts. He concluded that the opponents were Christians attracted to Judaism and that the Colossian heresy was some form of Judaism. Most likely it was typical of reactionary Judaism, such as practiced at Qumran, since many of the terms occur in that literature.

Historical inquiry reveals a sizeable Jewish community in the Lycus Valley at the first century. Josephus recorded that Antiochus the Great (223-187 B. C) imported two thousand Jewish families from Mesopotamia and Babylon to Lydia and Phrygia. However, Lightfoot (1817) faulted this calculation. The entire Jewish population would probably be much larger than this partial estimate implied. The attraction of the Jews to the areas was of some concern to the Jewish scholars. Contextual studies not only reveal a large and vocal Jewish element in the area, but also reveal that many Jews converted to Christianity.

Keener (1993) thinks that Jewish Sibylline oracles may issue from that region, and the activity of later Christian Montanists there suggests the possibility of ecstatic elements from both of these in local Judaism (Acts 2:18). He notes that Acts testifies that Paul was preaching Christ to philosophically minded audiences in the period, and that letters like Ephesians and Colossians give us an indication of Paul’s grasp of Greek philosophy and also some of the popular philosophical ideas that permeated both Gentile and Jewish thought in mid-first century Asia Minor.

Admittedly the above historical survey is not an elaborate one for a work of this nature, still the important points in this discussion are:

- (a) It helps us to appreciate the rich cultural backgrounds that played into the problems Paul was addressing in Colossae;

- (b) It helps us to find out for ourselves that the identity of the false teachers is not easy to specifically pin down; and
- (c) That the best way to come to grips with the problem at Colossae is to go to the biblical text itself.

## Exegesis and Discussion

In the passage under consideration, Paul speaks of the distinctive relation of Christ to God. As a Revealer and Redeemer of God, Christ bears the mark of definiteness and wholeness (Col. 1:13). Through Christ God has delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into that of light and freedom. The kingdom of *skotos* (darkness), which is the personified spiritual forces worshipped by the Colossians, is mentioned in contrast to *phos* (light) (Col. 1:12-13). The word *mathistemi* (to remove, transfer) is of special interest here. It reminds one of what was obtainable in an ancient world when a land was conquered perhaps by another king, the conqueror usually transferred the people of his conquered land *en mass*. For instance, the people of the northern kingdom of Israel were taken captive to Assyria while the southern Israelites were taken to Babylon as captives. The coming of God into the world through Jesus Christ to save sinners can be likened to a glorious light breaking on darkest night. It is a transference from guilt and condemnation to forgiveness and justification. The idea of the Church entering the Promised Land like the old Israel is present in the use of the word *kleros* (inheritance) (Col. 1:12). In Jesus we have *apolutrosis* (redemption). Our redemption is a release (*aphesis*) from sin. The idea of Exodus and the year of Jubilee is here. This is a direct attempt by Paul to counteract the Colossian heresy which thinks of redemption only in terms of being freed from angelic powers and elemental spirits of the universe.

Flemming (2005) states concisely that, “Paul affirms the supremacy of Christ most clearly in the magnificent Christological hymn of Colossians 1:15-20. This passage speaks forcefully to the concerns of the context and lays a foundation for Paul’s Christological response to the Colossians’ syncretism” (220). Who (*Hos*), which opens verse 15, carries us back at once to *huios* (son) of verse 13. Jesus, the Son of God who died on the cross, is the *eikon* (image) of the invisible God. *Eikon* is different from *homoionoma*, which only expresses a mere resemblance. *Eikon* (image) implies representation or the exact image of the archetype (cf. Col. 1:14, 2:9; Phil. 2:6; Heb. 1:3). The degree of resemblance between the archetype and the copy must be determined by the word’s context but could range from a partial or superficial resemblance to a complete or essential likeness. Given Colossians 1:19 and

Colossians 2:9 *eikon* here signifies that Jesus is an exact, as well as a visible, representation of God. Chrysostom (cited in Eadie 1979) speaks of it as “a faithful likeness in everything” (42). In other words, by the use of *eikon* Paul means that Jesus is the perfect manifestation of God. He fully reveals God to humankind in a form which they can see, know and comprehend. In His incarnate state, Jesus brought God to humanity and placed God under the cognizance of their very senses. Human beings saw Jesus manifest various forms of overt behaviour such as acting, weeping and speaking, as well as witnessing His suffering on the cross. The summary of Paul’s argument is that God did not make Himself known through a series of emanations, but once and for all exceptionally in Christ. Besides, the idea of Christ being the image of God reminds us of the creation story: “God said, let us make man in our own image . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him” (Gen. 1:26, 27). God’s original purpose at the creation was that man should be nothing less than the *eikon* of God, but as a result of sin, humankind fell short of that ideal goal of creation. Be that as it may, Jesus not only revealed God perfectly as God’s *eikon* but being a human being in the full sense of the word, demonstrated what human beings ought to be.

Christ is also *prototokos pases ketiseos* (the first-born of all creation). In Africa, the “firstborn” is the eldest child in a family. He sometimes goes with the name *Afu nwa echeta nna* (“once you see the son, he reminds you of the father”). He is regarded as the “beginning of his father’s strength and might” in the same manner and way Jacob used it for Reuben in Genesis 49:3, and as “the opener of womb” as it was used in Exodus 13:2. The usages, however, point to both paternal and maternal affiliations for the child. It is a position that is widely recognised in Africa and the accompanying privileges are greatly valued. The rights and privileges of the first-born include, and are not limited to, family leadership, a special blessing from the father, larger inheritance, and honoured place during festivities. He sometimes acts on behalf of the father. When the father is no more, he assumes the full role of a father to the siblings. Nobody in the family can act without seeking his approval. He is also referred to as the family head. In other words, he commands a measure of authority. But, when Paul speaks of the Son as the *prototokos* of all creation, he was thinking far beyond the African concept of the first-born. In fact, he might not be thinking within the earthly time frame at all, for in Jewish thinking, *prototokos* does not imply creation. Kasemann (1964) considers this idea when he

suggests Colossians 1:15 may be a reference to the Gnostic heavenly human who was to be born in the likeness of the Father, subject himself to the powers of fate in the world, and be exalted above all to pave the way to the divine realm for mortal humankind. He says further that this describes the original Man who stood in a special relation to God and shared his throne. But it should be noted that at the time Paul was writing, Gnosticism was not yet fully grown. Barclay (2009) is of the opinion that if we wish to keep the time sense and the honour sense combined, the rendering may be “He was brought to birth before all creation” (138). Athanasius (cited in Abogunrin, 2002), while replying to Arius’ interpretation of Proverbs 8:22, drew attention to Colossians 1:16 and added that, “if all creatures were created in him, he is other than the creatures, and he is not a creature but the Creator of creatures”.<sup>1</sup>

Christ is the origin and the goal of the whole creation. He is the creative agent of “all things”—things in heaven and things on earth. In other words, He is the Creator of all things (Col. 1:16a); Mediator (“through him”); Goal (“for him” Col. 1:16b) and Sustainer of the whole creation. He has no parallels or rivals. All cosmic powers are dependent on Him, whether thrones, principalities, or powers. In Him (Christ), the whole creation holds together. “Thrones”, “lordships”, “powers”, and “authorities” were different grades of angels having their places in different spheres of heaven. O’Brien (1882) thinks that it is hostile rather than friendly powers Paul had particularly in view. This is very much appropriate given the fears that Paul’s readers apparently held for cosmic powers and the concern of the rival teachings to appease them. For Paul, Jesus is not one of the created angelic beings but He is the Son of God. Barclay (2009) captures it correctly when he said that the “Son is the beginning of creation, and the end of creation, and the power who holds creation together, the Creator, the Sustainer, and the Final Goal of the world” (139).

Verse 18 opens with *kai autos estin he kephale tou somatos tes ekklesias* which means that Christ Himself is the head of the body which is the Church. It means, “he himself” and “he and no other”. The one who is the creative centre and focus of the universe (Col. 1:16) and the source of its cohesion (Col. 1:17b) is also (*kai*) “the head of the Body, which is the Church”. Houlden (1970) thinks *ekklesias* here refers to the whole creation and that it probably represents the idea of the *Logos* soul indwelling the whole cosmos. He sees affinities between this and the Adam of Genesis 1 who was made the head of all creation. But the errorists have challenged Christ as the sole authority over all else in

<sup>1</sup> Abogunrin, in lecture, based on: Select Treatises of St. Athanasius in Controversy with the Arians, Vol. 2. John Henry Newman. 2016. Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar.

creation and Paul wants to show that Jesus Christ is not only the ultimate meaning and goal of the old creation, he is also the head of the new creation which is the church. The previous verse shows Christ's qualification for such a headship. These are his divine nature, his supremacy over all else in creation and his holding the world together. Here, Paul shows that the old creation and the new creation, the church, are under one administration, headed by Jesus who is King of kings and Lord of lords.

Christ is *protokos ek ton nekron* ("the first-born from among the dead"). Harris (2010) thinks that this phrase may define even more precisely the ground for Christ's headship. He is the head of the Church in that (*hos*) he is the beginning (*arche*) being the first (*protokos*) to rise from the dead (Acts 26:23) and never to die again (Rom. 6:9). Harris suggests that the phrase may proffer a second ground for that headship: not only is Jesus the cause of the Church's existence and the origin of vitality (*arche*); he is also the pioneer and guarantor of a resurrection from death to immortality. His resurrection inaugurates a new creation and thus becomes the source of new life. The resurrection of Jesus was an event which was at the centre of all thinking, belief, and the experience of the early Church. Unlike what we have in the myths of dead heroes and founders of great religions, Christ is alive forevermore. Consequently, Christians experience his living and abiding presence. In the light of this therefore, Achtemeier, Green & Thompson (2001) think that "When Christians are part of the body of which Christ is head, there is no need to fear or to try to manipulate any other spiritual beings" (410).

Moreover, Paul declares that in Christ "all the *pleroma* (fullness) of deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9). Paul's use of the term *pleroma* (fullness) raises an interesting question. Has he borrowed it from the heretics and suffused it with new Christological content? There is no way one can find out. For Wright (1986), the Colossians have no cause to pay homage to any lesser supernatural beings or angel-intermediaries. This is simply because Christ is not just one among the many competing gods or powers. He reigns supreme over every ruler and authority (Col. 1:10). The totality of God, the entirety of His attributes and divinity, is pleased to dwell in Christ.

Again, Paul speaks of reconciliation in cosmic terms (*apokatallazai ta panta* Col.1:20). He applies it to Colossians, repeating the theme of reconciliation accomplished by God through the death of Christ (Col. 1:21-22). It is not only here that Paul thinks in this direction (cf. Eph. 1:10; Rom. 5:10 ff, 8:19-23; II Cor. 5:19ff). This is perhaps an attempt to show us as in Romans 8:19-23 that this is God's world and it is a redeemed world because in some amazing way God in Christ was reconciling the whole universe to Himself.

For all its intents and purposes, Paul was labouring to show that the cosmic powers which the Colossians feared and venerated also stand in need of reconciliation. The idea of reconciliation which includes all creation is in a sense strange. Be that as it may, the cosmic redemption of Romans 8:19-23 and the acceptance of the authority of Christ by the whole cosmos (Phil. 2:9-11) can only be meaningful in terms of cosmic reconciliation. Origen (cited by Barclay, 2009: 143) opined that the phrase referred to the devil and his angels, and he believed that in the end even they would be reconciled to God through the work of Christ. In the same vein, Theodoret and Erasmus (cited by Barclay, 2009: 144) thought that the angels were reconciled to humankind rather than God. They held the opinion that the angels had wanted to destroy humanity because of what humanity had done against God, but through the work of Christ they saw how much God still loved humanity and therefore their wrath was removed. This interpretation is close to the African conception of God, divinities, ancestors, spirits and humans, but the interpretation is not likely in the light of the Colossian situation. Alford (1976) thinks:

No reconciliation must be thought of which shall resemble ours in its process—for Christ took not upon him the seed of angels, nor paid any propitiatory penalty in the root of their nature. But, as much as he is their head as well as ours, for much as in him they, as well as ourselves, live and move and have their being, it cannot be but that the great event in which he was glorified through suffering, should also bring them nearer to God; who subsist in him in common with all creation (124).

Finally, verse 23 highlights four motifs found in Colossians 1:4-6 in the thanksgiving section: faith, hope, the hearing of the gospel, and its worldwide dissemination.

## Features of Christ's Uniqueness and Supremacy in Pauline Teaching

As a consequent of Paul's teaching in Colossians 1:15-23, the following features of Christ's uniqueness can be delineated:

(a) *The Redeemer*: Jesus Christ is our Redeemer. This entails being transferred from darkness to light, from slavery to freedom, from guilt to forgiveness, from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God, and from the power of Satan to the power of God.

(b) *The Image of God*: Jesus Christ is the Image of the invisible God. The invisible God, who dwells in unapproachable light is visibly expressed in Christ. He



is the outward projection of God; indeed, He is God's visible expression.

(c) *The First-born of all Creation*: Jesus Christ is not part of the creation but He Himself is the creator. Christ is the origin and the goal of the whole creation. He is the creative agent of "all things"—things in heaven and things on earth. In other words, He is the Creator of all things (Col. 1:16a); Mediator ("through him"); Goal ("for him" Col. 1:16b) and Sustainer of the whole creation. He has no parallels or rivals. All cosmic powers are dependent on Him, whether thrones, principalities, or powers. In Him (Christ), the whole creation holds together.

(d) *The Beginning and the First-born from among the Dead*: Jesus Christ is the Beginning and the First-born from among the Dead. Consequently, He is before and preeminent over all creation. This equally implies the subsequent resurrection of all those for whom He died.

(e) *The Fullness God*: Jesus Christ is fully God. The full and complete Godhead with all that it represents resides in Christ. In Christ all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form. In other words, He is entirely God, Head over old and new creation.

(f) *The Reconciler*: Jesus Christ is the Reconciler of all things. Everything that is in rebellion against God will be brought under Christ's power and will submit to Him as the Head of the new creation. It does not mean however, that all people are reconciled irrespective of their wills. It does mean that whoever rejects Christ's offer of reconciliation remains God's enemy.

## Colossian Heresy and Christianity in Africa

The heresy at Colossae attacked the total adequacy, uniqueness and supremacy of Jesus Christ over all else in creation. Perhaps, it is why the book opens with a lofty view of Jesus Christ and throughout the book we have a strong insistence on his completeness and finality, as the image of the invisible God, in whom the fullness of Deity dwells (Col. 1:15ff). Abogunrin (2002) thinks that there are two main reasons for the Colossian error. First, the teachings reflect the dualism of antagonism between spirit which is good and matter which is intrinsically evil. The material body is seen as the prison house of the rational soul. This led to the practice of asceticism which was aimed at liberating the soul from the bondage and passions that have their seats in the flesh. Once any human recognizes the divine nature of his or her soul, there is war without resolution between it and the body. The emancipation of the soul could only be achieved by rigorous asceticism and repression of the body. When the soul does gain victory

over the body, it attains its destiny of union with God or identity with the Ultimate Reality. Abogunrin comments (pers. comm.), "By this the freed man or woman possess an esoteric knowledge or psycho-physical power that controls the spiritual world." Second, he notes that "there is a kind of Oriental theosophy which defines the relation between the Deity and the sinful world by means of a series of intermediary existences. The major problem is how to gain entrance to the divine Presence. God's presence was believed to be distributed through a series of emanations stretching from heaven to earth." This is what Paul calls *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* (the elemental spirits of the world). Since they controlled the entrance to the divine Presence, humans must be liberated from them and at the same time seek their favour by paying homage to them and keeping the taboos proceeding from them. The ancient world was dominated by the thought of the influence of the stars. The most powerful and wisest of human beings could not act without consulting them. The Colossian heresy made the most of demon spirits which Paul calls *archai* (principalities) and *ezousiai* (powers). These demonic powers were in one sense, intermediaries, and in another sense, barriers between heaven and earth.

In the same way, Africans believe in an infinite number of spirits which are equally good and bad spirits. The divinities are intermediaries between God and man. Africans still live in a demon-haunted universe. Belief in witches and wizards is common. Natural forces like thunder, lightening, wind and rain have spiritual forces controlling them. Mountains, rivers, lakes, forests, valleys, trees and groves are inhabited by spirits which can be tapped either for blessings or for curses and harm. Consequently, Africans cannot help living under constant fear of the world believed to be infested by spirits and demons. There are people who are believed to be gifted to manipulate these spiritual forces either for good or for evil. These people are greatly feared by the people. The divinities are many and their number varies from locality to locality. For instance, Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), and Abogunrin (2002), noted that among the Yoruba, the number varies between 201, 401, 600 and 1700 while among the Igbo, Nupe, Akan, and Mende, the number is not as large. All these divinities and some of the spirits are worshipped. Traditionally, no person would venture to act without consulting a particular or family divinity. Not surprisingly, under these prevailing circumstances the gods and the spirits control access to the divine Presence.

However, not all Christians fall prey to this captivity today. A good percentage of Christians have absorbed the teachings of Paul. These Christians are mainly from Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements. Quite a few are from mainstream churches. That does

not mean that there are no false Pentecostal, Charismatic and Evangelical Movements as a lot of cultists, spiritualists and magicians have gone into the ministry to propagate their selfish interests. These false ministers speak in strange tongues and claim to cast out demons and raise the dead. Contrary to our expectations, a good percentage of Christians from mainstream churches and African Independent Churches still fall prey to the captivity. At present, we are witnessing an exodus of some African youths from the churches and a return to idol worship. A resurgence of idol worship is well attested to in most African communities. It is a sad statistic that the number of people who are genuinely Christians in Africa today is declining. About two thirds of them are nominal Christians. This is because there is a widespread misconception of Christianity in the continent. Christianity is not primarily a creed, but some Christians in Africa think it is. They imagine that if they can recite the Apostles' Creed from beginning to end without any mental reservations, this will make them a Christian. Some Christians in Africa think that Christianity is primarily a code of conduct and even contradict the people that hold that Christianity is primarily a creed. Others think that Christianity is primarily a system of religious worship and cluster of ceremonies. Stott (1991) states categorically that "Christianity is neither a creed, nor a code, nor a cult, important as these are in their place. It is in essence neither an intellectual, nor an ethical nor a ceremonial system. Indeed, we must go further. It is not all three put together. It is perfectly possible (though rare because difficult) to be orthodox in belief, upright in conduct and conscientious in religious observances, and still to overlook the heart of Christianity" (15).

If the essence of Christianity is neither a creed, nor a code, nor a cult, what is it? Stott (1991) in clear and strong terms writes: "It is Christ! It is not primarily a system of any kind; it is a person, personal relationship to that person. Then other things fit into shape—our beliefs, and our private and public devotions" (16, 18). Stott captures the missing piece in the life of many professing Christians in Africa. Many uninformed scholars speak bogusly about the teeming population of Christians in Africa. Yet, without Christ Christianity is reduced to mere activities without spirit, and a body that is bereft of the breath of life. What more! Some of these Christians quest for additions to Christ.

The Colossian heretics were teaching that they needed something more than Jesus Christ to span the gulf between God and humanity and to liberate humanity from the elemental spirits of the universe. They felt that the gospel message was too simple to be rational and that instead of the simplicities of the gospel they needed more elaborate and complex system which insisted on food taboos, ritual, special holy days,

festivals and Sabbaths. In the same vein, in Africa today, thousands, and tens of thousand of professing Christians are still involved in idol worship either directly or indirectly. It is ironical that while Jesus might be rated high as a mediator between God and humans, He is not accepted as the only way to God but rather as one of the intermediaries or one of the divinities. Moreover, there is a veneration and worship of ancestors to whom prayers are made. Some Christians are not exonerated from this. To this end, Abogunrin (2002) queried, "Is there any difference between such Christians and the Christians who venerate Mary, saints or angels and pray through them to God?" These powers which the Colossians tried to placate were angelic beings. The veneration and worship of angels is predominant in African Independent Churches.

The teaching in Colossae and the syncretistic practices in some churches in Africa today reduce Jesus to the status of an angelic being or one of the divinities or spirits needed to span the gulf or chasm between God and humanity. Access to God is only possible through the veneration of these go-between powers. The Apostle Paul refutes these teachings and practices by speaking of the uniqueness of Christ as the only Redeemer and Mediator between God and humankind. For Paul, the Colossian heresy adversely affects the assurance that life is secured in the hand of God through his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, and thereby creates uncertainty and hopelessness about the meaning of life. It therefore stands to reason that instead of achieving liberation from and victory over the principalities and powers, it is possible to become enslaved to them and to never have a taste of the joyous emancipation from all these powers which is made possible through the vicarious work of Christ on the cross.

## **Implications for Christianity in Africa**

Like the Colossians, many Christians in Africa have subverted the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ. Christ's role in creation has been reduced, along with His ability to fully protect from the influences of unseen powers. Christ, in this reduced form, becomes a part of creation, not the Lord over it. Paul was at pains to counteract the erroneous ideas about Jesus and to exalt Him as unrivalled Lord of everything, the sole and sufficient mediator of salvation between God and His people. Therefore, the Pauline teachings in Colossians 1:12-23 hold important implications for Christianity in Africa.

First, Christians in African should realize that the essence of Christianity is neither a creed, nor a code, nor a cult. It is not primarily a system of any kind. "It is Christ. It is a person, and a personal relationship to that person". The need for experiential knowledge of Jesus

Christ cannot be overemphasised for without Him, one cannot be classified as a Christian.

Second, Christians in Africa should realize that the life of a true Christian must be in Christ. In other words the Christian must live in dynamic relationship with Him. The whole life of the Christian must be lived in His conscious presence. Just as a tree has its roots deep in the soil and draws its nourishment from it, so the Christian must be rooted in Christ, the source of his life and strength. In the same vein, just as a house stands fast because it is erected on a firm foundation, so the Christian life must be grounded on the strength of Christ so that it can resist any kind of storm, tempest, and tornados that life may offer. Christians in Africa should realize that Christ is both the source of the Christian life and the foundation of stability for all Christians.

Third, Christians in Africa should realize that when believers are part of the body of which Christ is the head, there is no need to fear, investigate, manipulate, and experiment with any other spiritual beings. Their case is as good as settled with the assurance of inner peace that springs forth and flows from the Prince of Peace who is living right inside of them.

Fourth, “all-round conquest and triumph of Christ resounds as a word of assurance to people for whom the supernatural powers loomed as constant threats to a tranquil and secure existence” (Abogunrin, pers. comm.). The already defeated host of darkness cannot harm the person who is in Christ, and their ultimate overthrow in the future is assured. Christians in Africa would do well to realize this indisputable truth.

Fifth, Christians in Africa have no cause to pay homage or to pledge allegiance to any lesser supernatural beings, be it divinities or ancestors. Jesus Christ is not one among the many competing gods or powers. He reigns supreme over every ruler and authority. He is wholly sufficient—he supplies all human needs and even more; and he is wholly other—he cannot be classified among his creation.

Sixth, Christians are not to follow ceremonies, rituals, initiations and restrictions in order to be saved. Christ is all that one needs in order to be saved.

Seventh, Christians in Africa must not obtain secret or acquire an exoteric knowledge in order to be saved or be liberated from the clutches of evil powers. They must not adhere to human wisdom, tradition, and philosophies. God’s secret is Christ. Christ has been revealed to all. Human wisdom, tradition, and philosophies at best are vain speculations and at worst can be misleading given that they have human origin. In contradistinction to them, Christ’s words are our ultimate example and authority.

Finally, Christians in Africa should shun combining aspects of several religions. They have everything since they have Christ. Jesus Christ is all-sufficient as He is

also supreme above all else in creation, in time and eternity.

## Conclusion

To counteract the heresies replete in Colossae, Paul portrays the uniqueness and supremacy of Jesus Christ. He graphically illustrated His supremacy both in creation and redemption. In creation, Christ is described as the image of the invisible God, the first-born over all creation, the Creator of all things, the goal of all things, one “before” everything, and the sustainer of all things. In redemption, Christ is presented as the head of the body, the Church, the beginning, the first-born from the dead, the possessor of God’s fullness, and the agent of God’s reconciliation. In the light of these, and like Paul, we advocate the total adequacy and all-sufficiency of Christ in the African context, and we call for a much more serious Christian discipleship in African churches.

## References

- Abogunrin, S. O. 2002. Total Adequacy of Christ in the African Context. *Lecture notes*. University of Ibadan, Ibadan.
- Achtemeir, P. J., J. B. Green, and M. M. Thompson. 2001. *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Alford, H. 1976. *Alford’s Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary, Vol. 3*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Guardian Press.
- Awolalu, J. O. and Dopamu. 1979. *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Onibonjo Press.
- Bandstra, A. J. 1974. Did the Colossians Errorists Need a Mediator? In *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenny, eds. Pp. 329-343. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.
- Barclay, W. 2009. *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonias*. Bangalore: Theological Publications.
- Bornkamm, G. 1948. Die haresie des kolosserbriefes. *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 73: 11-20.
- Bruce, F. F. 1957. *Ephesians and Colossians, NIC*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Dibelius, M. 1975. The Isis Initiation in Apuleius and Related Rites. In *Conflict at Colossae, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*. F. O. Francis and W. A. Meeks, eds. SBLSPS 4, Missoula, Mont: Scholars.

- Eadie, J. 1979. *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Bible of Paul to the Colossians*. W. Young, ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker House.
- Flemming, D. 2005. *Contextualizing in the New Testament, Patterns for Theology and Mission*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic.
- Harris, M. J. 2010. *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: Colossians and Philemon*. Nashville, Tennessee: Academic.
- Houlden, J. L. 1970. *Paul's Letters from Prison*. London: Penguin.
- Kasemann, E. 1964. Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy. In *Essays on the New Testament Themes*. Ernst Kasemann, ed. Pp. 149-168. Atlanta, Georgia: S.C.M.
- Lightfoot, J. B. 1879. *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to the Philemon*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: MacMillan.
- Lohse E. 1971. *Colossians and Philemon*. Translated by W. R. Poehlmann and R. J. Karris. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Lyonnet, S. 1956. L'étude du Milieu Litteraire et L'exegese du Nouveau Testament: Les Adversaires de Paul a Colosses. *Biblica* 37: 27-38.
- Moule, C. F. D. 1968. *The Epistle of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Brien, P. T. 1982. *Colossians, Philemon. Word Bible Commentary 44*. Waco, Texas: Word Books.
- Wright, T. N. 1986. *The Epistles of Paul to Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans.
- Zan, J. L. 1970. *Introduction to the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Michigan.



**Valentine Chukwujekwu Mbachi (Ph.D)**, lectures in New Testament Studies in the Department of Religious Studies in the Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.

Author email: [valmbachi@gmail.com](mailto:valmbachi@gmail.com)  
[vc.mbachi@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:vc.mbachi@unizik.edu.ng)

---



**John Uchendu** is a Ph.D student of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.

Author email: [onviiij85@gmail.com](mailto:onviiij85@gmail.com)

---

## NEWS & OPINIONS

---

# Comment on Merz, “From Culture to People: Thinking Anthropologically with Jesus and Paul”

Michael Jindra

---

There is much in Merz’s provocative article that I agree with—his cautions about culture, his Christian call to close divisions and his highlighting of commonality amidst diversity. But I also have some basic disagreements. His proposal to drop culture as a term is blind to the many ways that culture is increasingly used across a number of disciplines, with illuminating results. His example of Jesus and Paul is also a flawed use of the biblical text.

First, Merz follows the tradition of “writing against culture” that became an influential anthropological subfield in the 1980s. There have been many fine defenses of the culture concept by anthropologists in the last decades (Sahlins 1999; Lewis 2014; Boggs 2004). I won’t rehash those here, as readers can look them up. But let me add to the defense of culture with a survey of how culture fits into some fascinating work being done across disciplines today.

Merz argues that anthropology should give up culture just at the time other disciplines are using it in very insightful ways. For example, a major sociological study of religious parenting, published earlier this year (Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo 2020) expected to find a lot of variance in the cultural models of religious parents. Instead, they found “cultural consensus and coherence” and argue against a model of culture that is primarily fragmentary, disjointed or contested. Chapter Five, “Theorizing Cultural Models,” makes the general argument and is an excellent explanation of how notions of culture have evolved, from the Parsonian model of bounded cultures, to the Post-Parsonian one (e.g. Merz’s cited author James Clifford, or Ann Swidler), to the authors’ favored “Cultural Models” approach introduced by cognitive anthropologists like Naomi Quinn, Claudia Strauss, and Roy D’Andrade. They also draw upon the theory of “critical realism,” which has a following among many Christian scholars, such as the voluminous work of the sociologist and Catholic Margaret Archer (2008). To adequately

understand what motivates people and causes them to act, one needs good social theory.

If you want to understand social problems, culture is essential, alongside two other central concepts, “structure” and individual/agency (Archer 2008; Stephens, Markus, and Fryberg 2012), as evidenced by recent studies from psychologists and economists (Kearney and Haskins 2020). The fields of cultural sociology and cultural psychology have been growing significantly while developing tools to understand how culture works in ways more insightful than what most anthropologists are doing.

Anthropologist Joe Henrich’s recent tour de force (Henrich 2020) on why “weird” Westerners are “psychologically peculiar and particularly prosperous” puts culture, especially the radically new exogenous marriage practices instituted by the Church, along with literacy, at the center of the story. You can find culture in the brain, according to the growing area of cultural neuroscience (Sasaki and Kim 2017) and related disciplines. History uses it extensively, along with political scientists like Ron Inglehart and social psychologists like Geert Hofstede and Shalom Schwartz, whose work on worldwide cultural contrasts has been cited thousands of times. This more survey-based work has its limitations, which is where rich and thick ethnographic work (like Merz’s own) can clarify both commonality and difference.

There is little debate in these disciplines about getting rid of culture as a noun. (I doubt that one can use it as an adjective without it having some meaning as a noun.) Anthropology will be even more of an ignored backwater if it eliminated culture, as it would limit how anthropology could contribute to important debates on social change, history, or inequalities. Disciplines like sociology and psychology seem much more relevant on these issues than an anthropology that is now turned in upon itself precisely because of the effects of critiques of culture in anthropology. Work that breaks down

interdisciplinary boundaries, such as that of the above-mentioned Henrich, who combines anthropology with psychology, economics and evolutionary biology, is best positioned to make future contributions to understanding human life.

After his initial critique of the culture concept, Merz then moves “from culture to theology,” though Merz uses more direct biblical examples rather than theological ones. It’s an interesting argument, given the unique position of Christians caught between contrasting epistemologies. Christians of various stripes have attempted to hold reason and faith (and its biblical connections) in a relationship without dropping wholeheartedly into either scientism or fideism. Some Christians combine these epistemologies in illegitimate ways, as I believe creation scientists have. Merz’s argument seems to make the same mistake as the creation scientists do. The Bible teaches us about our relationship to God. It is not an attempt to understand the world in modern, scientific terms, and I don’t think we can use it, or the examples of Jesus or Paul, to derive analytical categories. Jesus and Paul lived before science as we know it existed. That discourse would have been mostly incomprehensible to people in that time. We use many other essential concepts discovered since then, like gravity. De-emphasizing “knowledge” in favor of “engagement” risks falling into the long-noted evangelical trap of anti-intellectualism (Noll 1994).

There is another reason why I don’t think Jesus or Paul’s non-use of culture has any import. People have different gifts, roles and callings (Romans 12:4-8), a notion both biblical and scientific. Jesus and Paul had very unique callings. Theirs was to call people back to God, not necessarily to understand humanity scientifically. While their calling is part of us as Christians, most of us have other callings or vocations, including as anthropologists who categorize humanity into different groups and try to figure out both commonality and diversity, and thus avoid inaccurate stereotypes.

Merz is concerned about proper engagement with others. “Omniculturalism,” for instance, is an approach proposed by cultural psychologists that is sensitive to Merz’s concerns (Moghaddam 2012). During interactions with others our primary concern is to “give priority to human commonalities.” Secondly, however, “group-based differences” are recognized so diversity and connected inequalities are not ignored and cultural differences can adequately be addressed when they arise.

I think what Merz is arguing is that science and its concepts are not the only way of talking about human life, and that when relating to people, “culture” can sometimes get in the way. Perhaps dropping culture as a noun is appropriate for ontological anthropology,

though even then I’m not convinced. But anthropology is an expansive discipline, with many different approaches to understanding human life, from “hard” scientific, to humanistic. Culture should certainly play a strong role in many of these approaches.

## References

- Archer, Margaret. 2008. Structure, Culture and Agency. In *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture*. Mark D. Jacobs and Nancy Weiss Hanrahan, eds. Pp. 17-34. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Boggs, James P. 2004. The Culture Concept as Theory, in Context. *Current Anthropology* 45 (2): 187-209.
- Henrich, Joseph. 2020. *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Kearney, Melissa S., and Ron Haskins. 2020. How Cultural Factors Shape Economic Outcomes: Introducing the Issue. *The Future of Children* 30 (1): 3-8.
- Lewis, Herbert S. 2014. *In Defense of Anthropology: An Investigation of the Critique of Anthropology*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Moghaddam, Fathali M. 2012. The Omnicultural Imperative. *Culture & Psychology* 18 (3): 304-330.
- Noll, Mark A. 1994. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Sahlins, Marshall. 1999. Two or Three Things That I Know about Culture. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. JSTOR: 399-421.
- Sasaki, Joni Y., and Heejung S. Kim. 2017. Nature, Nurture, and Their Interplay: A Review of Cultural Neuroscience. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 48 (1): 4-22.
- Smith, Christian, Bridget Ritz, and Michael Rotolo. 2020. *Religious Parenting: Transmitting Faith and Values in Contemporary America*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Stephens, Nicole M., Hazel Rose Markus, and Stephanie A. Fryberg. 2012. Social Class Disparities in Health and Education: Reducing Inequality by Applying a Sociocultural Self Model of Behavior. *Psychological Review* 119 (4): 723.



**Michael Jindra** is a research scholar in the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs at Boston University. His most recent article (co-authored) is “Relational Work in the Struggle Against Poverty: Balancing scholarly critiques and emancipatory practices in the nonprofit sector.” *Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 2020. <https://bu.academia.edu/MichaelJindra>.

*Author email:* [jindraprof@gmail.com](mailto:jindraprof@gmail.com)

---

## 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"<sup>1</sup> (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

---

<sup>1</sup> 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

- Harrison, Faye V., ed. 1991. *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology of Liberation*. Washington, D.C.: Association of Black Anthropologists, American Anthropological Association.
- Jindra, Michael. 2021. Comment on Merz, “From Culture to People: Thinking Anthropologically with Jesus and Paul”. *On Knowing Humanity Journal* 5 (1): 34-36.
- Merz, Johannes. 2017. Making Meaning Present: Semiotics and the Ontological Life of Stones in West Africa. *Studies in Media and Communication* 5 (2): 145-156. <http://redfame.com/journal/index.php/smc/article/view/2758>. Accessed 21 November 2017.
- . forthcoming 2021. Revealing Christ’s Presence in Jesus Films and Dreams: Towards Ontonic Semiotics of Non-representation. *Exchange*.
- Merz, Johannes and Sharon Merz. 2017. Occupying the Ontological Penumbra: Towards a Postsecular and Theologically Minded Anthropology. *Religions* 8 (5): 1-17. <http://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/8/5/80>. Accessed 28 April 2017.
- Robbins, Joel. 2017. Can There Be Conversion Without Cultural Change? *Mission Studies* 34 (1): 29-52.



**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](mailto:johannes_merz@sil.org)

---

## NEWS & OPINIONS

---

# The CHIEF Approach: A New Strategy to Holistic Ministry

Mike Mtika

---

Jesus said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20, ESV). The disciples were to begin in Jerusalem, move on to Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). Following the example of Christ, the disciples walked from place to place and home to home talking to people individually or in groups. The people who received Jesus as their Savior and Lord were encouraged to build each other up. The disciples thus spread the Gospel through dialogue, a “deep, challenging and enriching conversation, a mutual process of building shared understanding, meaning, communication and creative action” (Westoby and Dowling 2013, 10). Dialogue, Westoby and Dowling (2010 and 2013) inform us, is the challenging engagement of the “other”. It demands sharing convictions while listening deeply to what the other has to say, engaging in a soulful orientation that involves the cultivation of welcoming relationships, and a commitment to solidarity among those involved in each other’s lives. This enables people to be transformed and then to engage in transforming the world. Dialogue is thus transformative.

Pamoza International, a nonprofit organization operating in northern Malawi in south east Africa, contiguously engages in transformative dialogue in its Christian outreach and community development work (Mtika and Kistler 2017). Following its contiguous approach, Pamoza started operating in three communities back in 2009 with a population of about 3,000. Since then, it has contiguously expanded, and as of 2020, the organization is serving twenty communities with a population of 32,000. It follows the person to person, household to household, village to village, and community to community approach in its holistic ministry, spreading the Gospel as well as facilitating community development. Hence, the mission of the

organization is to sustainably transform families in the rural communities the organization serves.

To carry out its mission, the organization engages in five main programs: (a) Christian Outreach and Discipleship; (b) Health and Nutrition; (c) Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment; (d) Education, Adult Literacy, and Vocational Training; and (e) Agriculture, Food Security, and Resource Care. At the household level, each program seeks to achieve a specific objective. Christian Outreach and Discipleship aims at improving household members’ character. Health and Nutrition seeks to improve health and nutritional well-being. The Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment program focuses on improving income while the Education, Literacy, and Vocational Training program seeks to improve a household’s educational attainment and vocational skills. Lastly, the Agriculture, Food Security, and Resource Care program aims at improving agricultural production and food security. This strategy has been dubbed the CHIEF (Character, Health, Income, Education, and Food Security) approach.

Through the CHIEF approach, Pamoza targets the most vulnerable households in a community. Pamoza identifies them with the help of community leaders then recruits Christian Outreach and Community Development (COCD) Facilitators from within the communities where the households are located. Each Facilitator works with 50 to 60 such households annually. The Facilitator engages in transformative dialogue with these households to improve their CHIEFs. With the help of various Pamoza experts (experts in the five programs mentioned above), COCD Facilitators start with assessing the CHIEF status of each vulnerable household followed by a long-term plan of action for the transformation of the household. Pamoza monitors and annually evaluates the household’s progress. An important evaluation factor is whether the household can sustain its CHIEF transformation process once initiated. When this is determined for a household, and this could take a number of years, the responsible COCD Facilitator engages in “reducing contact time”

with the household but still monitors its transformation progress. Households receiving less contact time are replaced by new households.



A COCD Facilitator Visiting a Household  
in the CHIEF Program

While COCD Facilitators dialogue with household members to improve their CHIEFs, they also, with the help of the experts, facilitate the creation of groups around specific matters such as income generation, functional literacy, improved farming and livestock rearing practices, and Christian outreach activities (preaching outreaches, Bible study, prayer fellowship, family life skills, etc.). The objective here is to create what Wenger (1998) and Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) term communities of practice, that is, groups of people dialogically learning from one another in pursuing improvements in CHIEF. In fact, although CHIEF targets the vulnerable households, other households not under CHIEF have been reached in two main ways. First, any time the COCD Facilitator comes to visit and train a CHIEF household, other members of nearby households come and listen in then go to their households and implement what they have learned. Second, the other members of nearby households may not come to the training the Facilitator had with a CHIEF household but observes what the CHIEF household is doing then adopt those practices.

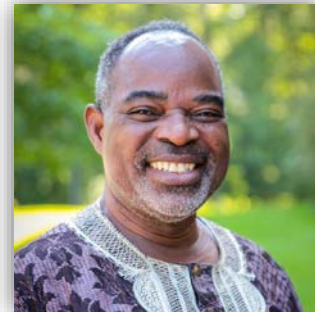
The CHIEF approach is a unique strategy in which a COCD Facilitator dialogically works with a household holistically, that is, addressing both spiritual and physical needs but also engaging in the contiguous process of moving to other households when a household has been set on a solid path in its improvement of its CHIEFs. Households attaining appreciable progress in their CHIEF areas are engaged in reaching out to other households, helping them to improve their CHIEFs. This is reminiscent of how disciples spread the Gospel—moving from home to home and community to community, encouraging those who have accepted Jesus as Savior and Lord to

build up one another and reach out to others in their proximity.

The CHIEF program is still in its infancy. We started it in late 2018. Pamoza is monitoring it carefully to make sure that participating households achieve long-term transformation.

## References:

- Mtika, Mike and Matthew Kistler. 2017. Contiguous Community Development. *Journal of Rural Studies* 51:83-92.
- Wenger, E. 1998. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E., R. Dermott, and W. M. Snyder. 2002. *Cultivating Communities of Practice*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Westoby, Peter and Gerard Dowling. 2010. *Dialogical Community Development*. West End, Australia: Tafina Press.
- . 2013. *Theory and Practice of Dialogical Community Development: International Perspectives*. New York: Routledge.



**Mike Mtika:** BSc in Agriculture (1978) from Bunda College of Agriculture, University of Malawi, now Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources; MSc in Agricultural Extension and Rural Development from Reading University in United Kingdom (1980); and PhD in Sociology from Washington State University (1998). Expertise in rural and community development. Research focus: (a) political economy of HIV/AIDS and (b) how people draw upon capital to improve their well-being. Worked as an Agricultural and Rural Development Officer in the Ministry of Agriculture

in Malawi (1978-1986). Joined World Vision (Malawi) and worked for the organization starting as a Projects Coordinator in 1986 and ending as Technical Services and Operations (Projects) Director in 1991. Currently Professor of Community, Economic, and Political Sociology at Eastern University. Also, Founder and Director of Field Operations of Pamoza International, a non-profit organization involved in Christian Outreach and Community Development in northern Malawi.

*Author email:* [mmtika@eastern.edu](mailto:mmtika@eastern.edu)

## NEWS & OPINIONS

---

# The Politics of (Self) Division

Kevin Birth

---

*Editor's Note:* Our country and our culture are deeply divided at this time. Worst of all, we have lined up all the various issues facing us into "liberal" and "conservative" forms, requiring people to pick one side or another and stick to it. Having heard some of the balance that Kevin Birth brings to this matter, I asked him to write reflectively on the situation for Christians who have allowed the culture to divide them just as deeply from one another. Eloise Meneses

*Biography:* Having determined in high school that I was a mediocre fiddle-player and tobacco chewer, I left Harrisburg, Pennsylvania to pursue anthropology. In graduate school at the University of California at San Diego, I was trained in social and psychological anthropology. In 1989, I began my research on cultural concepts of time, and conducted ethnographic field research in rural Trinidad. In 1993, one of my esteemed professors said, "You know too much about this place, you better leave." Soon after, I left California in my old Mazda with my pregnant wife and new Ph.D. to seek my fortune at Queens College, where I had been hired on the basis of wearing purple pants during my interview.

Since then I've continued to research on time, published several books, and got mixed up in debates about time measurement policies.

There is a dialogue in my head. One voice comes from being a liberal academic teaching at a major university in a large, coastal city. The other voice comes from growing up in central Pennsylvania with rural, conservative friends and being involved in a very conservative Youth for Christ. Every day, these voices get challenged. My liberal friends say things that my Pennsylvanian self finds offensive and obnoxious. My conservative friends say things that my liberal academic self finds ill-informed and myopic. My liberal friends tend to view conservatives as stupid, and selfish. My conservative friends tend to view liberals as immoral and arrogant. In fact, both sets of friends are smart, wise, and moral.

And thus my internal dialogue, waged in hyperbole, takes shape. Here is just one instantiation.

*Lib-me:* A couple of months ago some unfortunately conservative follower of Trump challenged me by saying "what makes you such an expert on that." I replied, "I published a book on it." I took down another conservative by explaining that my sources were peer-reviewed and not some anonymous meme probably posted by some pig farmer in the Philippines (that's identity of the person associated with QAnon's IP address, please don't make me explain how an IP address can indicate somebody's identity). I then explained what peer review is—it's like being graded by multiple experts. Of course, the person I was explaining this to probably never got higher than a C in high school English.

Oh, if I'm not an expert on something, chances are I know somebody who is. I can say things like "My friend who researches that says. . .," or "my colleague who is one of the world's leading authority on those has concluded . . ."

Yes, I can shame a conservative in front of a liberal audience with the best of them. What I don't understand is why those conservatives keep supporting Trump. In the face of all the facts and arguments that I muster and which they cannot refute, they won't budge.

*Conserva-me:* What a jerk. I mean, what a colossal, gold-plated, certified jerk. I don't want people like him running the country, and that's probably exactly the sort of person liberal politicians would hire. They'd just make new rules and tell me what I can and cannot do, and what I should and should not think. What makes him so blasted smart? Just because he got himself some advanced degree from one of those liberal, brainwashing colleges doesn't make him smarter. My grandfather never got anything beyond a high school degree and was the smartest and wisest person I know. On Sundays he could quote from every book of the Bible, and during the week he could fix anything. He would know how to take this self-inflated windbag down a notch or two.

*Lib-me:* What this nation needs is to make people wear masks and take COVID-19 seriously. We need a national mandate. To address climate change,

we need to end people's use of fossil fuels. We need gun control—there is no reason for somebody to have some of those guns. We need to model our healthcare system on socialist European nations to ensure quality healthcare for everyone. Why are these things so hard to understand?

*Conserva-me:* Make me do this; make me do that; keep me from doing this; take away my guns; and turn me into a socialist. Heck, I bet he doesn't even know which end of the gun is which, much less the difference between a .22 and a shotgun. I know about guns—I don't need some smug city liberal telling me about them. Let me take care of myself—I don't need anybody telling me what is right or wrong other than my family and my pastor. A coastal liberal atheist has no foundation on which to preach to me about morality, anyway. The climate might be changing, but it's not because of my car. It's not like I can walk to the grocery store or work. I can't afford to live in a place where everything is that handy, and I'm not sure I'd want to.

*Lib-me:* And how can THOSE people be pro-life when they don't support universal healthcare, are pro-gun, and back a president who has done nothing about COVID?

*Conserva-me:* How can somebody who wants to allow late-term abortions have any morality whatsoever? These liberals just want to have sex without any consequences or responsibilities, and yet they want to tell me about my moral contradictions? Give me a break.

*It is easy to see those who hold different views as inferior. As I reflect on my inner voices, I'm struck that my liberal voice is egotistical, and my conservative voice is defensive. I note that the liberal voice argues from a feeling of intellectual superiority, and the conservative from a sense of moral superiority. It strikes me that the two voices talk past each other. Morality and knowledge are pitted against each other. That should not be.*

*My conservative voice feels that what is at stake in politics is freedom and morality. Trump is the vehicle for defending those principles. He is a flawed vehicle, but he is all my conservative voice has right now. Now that Trump is no longer president, the liberal challenge to freedom and morality remain and the liberal proclivity toward governmental regulations and increased government spending is a threat. The liberal side of me does not view the use of science and knowledge as a threat to freedom and morality, but as a means of achieving both, yet, the liberal in me has to grudgingly admit that the regulations are a shortcut to achieve conformity, and that throwing money at a*

*problem does not necessarily solve it. I realize that both voices are important—they need to be in dialogue. I also realize that right now there is too little dialogue. The visceral joy of a put down seems to have replaced respectful disagreement.*

*Many years ago, Bronislaw Malinowski urged anthropologists to learn culture from "the natives' point of view." We cannot do that if we are only preaching our point of view. Another anthropologist, Gregory Bateson, argued that we should never look at processes of change in terms of who has power and who does not, but in terms of how people react to one another. I fear I have lost sight of such anthropological principles. I fear that rather than seeking to understand the point of view of those with whom I differ, that I often relish their disdain and celebrate the differences. Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek," not "blessed are those who hurl the best insult" or "blessed are those who are the aggrandizingly pedantic." When I look at those who hold opposing political views, do I listen, or do I polarize?*



**Kevin Birth** is a professor of anthropology at Queens College of the City University of New York. He is also a member of the faculty of anthropology doctoral program of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He has numerous articles and four books: *Any Time is Trinidad Time*, *Bacchanalian Sentiments*, *Objects of Time*, and *Time Blind*.

Author email: [kevin.birth@qc.cuny.edu](mailto:kevin.birth@qc.cuny.edu)

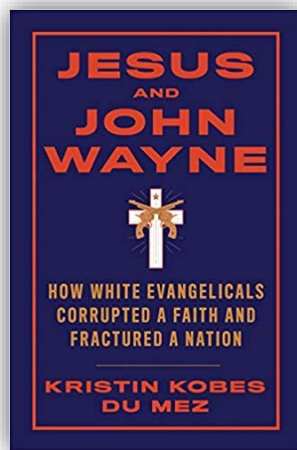


## BOOK REVIEW

# Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation

*By Kristin Kobes Du Mez*

Reviewed by Christine Albertini



New York: Liveright (Norton)  
2020

For anyone seeking to understand the currents pummeling our national life, *Jesus and John Wayne* is a must-read. In fact, it's a page-turner. Its insightful window into Christian evangelicalism shows this movement as a riptide in the U.S. cultural sea change of the past half-century. With meticulous research and abundant footnoting, Kristen Kobes Du Mez unpacks such a straightforward narrative that it quickly begins to seem obvious.

One can look to the book's subtitle (*How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*) to know the author's point of view. In Chapter One, she makes the case that evangelicalism has drifted so far from the Jesus of the Gospels that it must be considered more a cultural movement than a religious one. It does not follow the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, but rather Jesus, "a spiritual bad-ass", to quote a popular evangelical figure (247). This Jesus recruits defenders of the movement's foundational belief in biblically mandated male authority and women's subordination. Convinced that this mandate is under continuous

assault, the cause has enshrined an increasingly militaristic, racist, militant Christian masculinity.

Subsequent chapters reach back through the twentieth century to explain how we got here. Beginning with Teddy Roosevelt (the original bombastic, cowboy president), each era has produced the movement's heroes (from John Wayne to George W. Bush), foot soldiers (including Jerry Falwell, and a parade of televangelists) and villains (Bill Clinton, Barak Obama, and most especially, Hillary Clinton). The book documents a robust, coordinated network of political, church, publishing, and para-church organizations. What is revealed is a group so aggrieved and threatened that it waged a battle to take-over the U.S. military, political life, courts, and public schools, with a remarkable degree of success. Its zenith in the election of Donald Trump can be understood in this way: "Evangelicals hadn't betrayed their values. Donald Trump was the culmination of their half-century-long pursuit of a militant Christian masculinity" (271).

I attended a recent online book-talk with the author. She comes to this subject with the authority of a scholar and a close observer. She grew up and was educated in a rural, evangelical environment in Iowa. She is professor of history at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, MI, a school of the Christian Reformed faith, considered an evangelical denomination. She is careful to state that her views are her own. She expressed being drawn to this topic because of the roots she shares with a movement whose current manifestation she doesn't recognize (2). She thought, "Who better to hold these views up to the light, to examine and deconstruct them?" One only need follow her Twitter account (@kkdumez) to see that she has 'stirred the pot'.

So, if you're scratching your head about our national division over Confederate monuments, Black Lives Matter, the Supreme Court, public schools, or who won the 2020 presidential election, you will want to read this book. Whether you *see yourself* in this story or see it as a *chilling morality tale*, allow Professor du Mez to illuminate the darkness in which we walk.





**Christine Albertini** is a student in the MA in Theological and Cultural Anthropology program at Eastern University. She works at the intersection of business and education to ensure that all people have access to the economic benefits of society. Her research interest examines how gender norms in different religions effect women's access to the economic life of their community, and explores ways to measure the spiritual impact afforded by underlying economic stability.

*Author email:* [christine.albertini@eastern.edu](mailto:christine.albertini@eastern.edu)

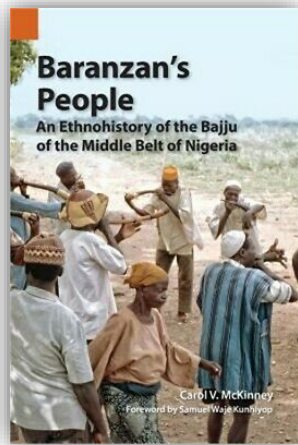
---

## BOOK REVIEW

# Baranzan's People: An Ethnohistory of the Bajju of the Middle Belt of Nigeria

By Carol V. McKinney

Reviewed by Jeremy McNabb



Dallas TX: SIL International  
2019

Reproducing the history and essence of a group of people onto the printed page is not simply a matter of observing and taking notes. To really relay the spirit of a people, one must get inside their community, abandon oneself, and then take the time to reflect on what one has absorbed. In *Baranzan's People: An Ethnohistory of the Bajju of the Middle Belt of Nigeria*, Carol V. McKinney employs her fieldwork, research, and interviews with Bajju people to produce a well-rounded ethnohistory of this group, giving special attention to the relatively modern integration and assimilation of Christianity with the Bajju culture.

The comprehensive nature of this work brings to mind Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*, as a deep dive into the practices of the Bajju people. Thirty years of reflection on her life with the Bajju has given the author a wealth of well-considered theological and anthropological reflections. It is thoroughly readable in its narration whether one is an undergraduate just beginning classes or long-time professional with dozens of ethnographies already stacked precariously on their bookshelves. A surprisingly engaging piece of prose, with delightfully

retold anecdotes of Bajju culture, *Baranzan's People* could eventually become a classic.

As with any ethnographic work, McKinney treats the reader to a tour of legal proceedings, gender roles, hunting practices, views on witchcraft, the spiritual realm, taboos, birth, marriage, and death. Curiosities abound.

Of particular interest to this reader was the attention given to the introduction, assimilation, and indigenization of Christianity among the Bajju people. The negative aspects of colonization should always be a major concern for any anthropologist and this is doubly true when missionary efforts are underway, but using the Bajju's own reports of Christianity's entrance into their area, McKinney paints a picture of a missionary effort that is far more complex and nuanced than some of the more coercive efforts that have taken place in other areas of the world and at other times in history.

McKinney details how, prior to Christianization, the Bajju people held to a purposefully vague notion of a god, believing that he exists and that he dwells above them in the sky, but with little else to be said. The mechanics of their religion centered more on *nkut* or witchcraft, than any kind of deity. For them, the introduction of Christianity was accepted as a biographical entry on the god they already believed to exist. Oddly enough to us, in their eyes, Christian *taboos* about alcohol and sex indicated to the Bajju (who had similar taboos) that Christianity was valid and appealing as a religion.

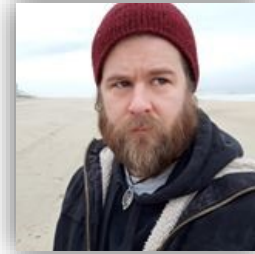
With the aid of several helpful charts, the author also explains that, just as it did in the West, the Bajju Church quickly divided itself. The resulting denominations, however, unlike European Christianity where theology was the central issue, had more to do with how much of Bajju culture remained in their churches. Her records reflect the Bajju's collective wrestling matches with the concepts of polygamy, supernatural dreams, visions, a persistent belief in witchcraft, and a localized version of what other regions would call the "prosperity gospel." McKinney also tracks arguments by other anthropologists that the Bajju should return to their pre-Christian beliefs, and how these assertions have mostly

fallen on deaf ears with the Bajju people. For example, despite some problematic developments such as the mandated shaving of certain hairstyles for educational opportunities and the import of Western Christianity's "purity culture," the overall position of women and children have advanced too much for their society to desire to return to a system in which women were ruled by a secret, and sometimes vindictive, council of men—the *abvoi*. McKinney demonstrates that the overall thrust to accept and remain in Christianity has come from those who have, traditionally, been of marginal value to the community prior to Christianity's coming. First-hand accounts of this, which are so key in lending credibility to McKinney's claims (mostly) on behalf of Christianity, are in ready supply.

Beyond anthropologists, *Baranzan's People* provides perspective to students of church history and theology. Bajju Christianity has not been around long enough to have appeared on history scholars' radar, much less make an impact on the global academic scene, but the unique ways in which denominations have developed and the myriad of points at which indigenous culture has been integrated into Christianity is valuable to anyone interested in the development of doctrine and the decentering of European norms.

What few critiques I have of this otherwise excellent book relate to turns of phrases which are, in this reviewer's experience, inappropriate and have fallen out of favor within inter-faith and psychological communities. The term "Judeo-Christian" suggests a unity and unanimity between Judaism and Christianity regarding certain beliefs which are more nuanced and divided than such a term suggests. Judaic beliefs tend to be erased by this term more frequently than not. Secondly, the unfortunate use of the word "retarded" instead of "developmentally disabled" reflects, perhaps, the negative view some Bajju people have of developmentally disabled people, but is nevertheless hurtful for English readers. Future editions could remedy these insensitivities without affecting the rest of the text.

Overall, *Baranzan's People* is informative and specific without being dry or repetitious. It offers up a small piece of history that is largely missing from standard church history texts. McKinney's theological observations of the Bajju's belief system walk the reader through an otherwise difficult gap between cultures. I would recommend it for any student or scholar of anthropology, missiology, theology, or church history.



**Jeremy M. McNabb** is a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Theological and Cultural Anthropology program at Eastern University. He has a Bachelor's Degree in Biblical and Theological Studies from Regent University.

Author email: [jeremymcnabb.1@gmail.com](mailto:jeremymcnabb.1@gmail.com)

---

## BOOK REVIEW

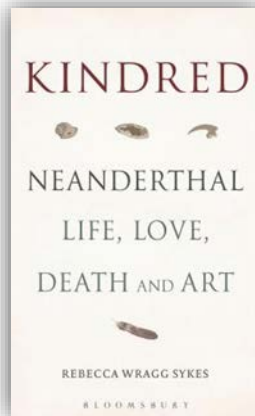
---

### Kindred: Neanderthal Life, Love, Death and Art

*By Rebecca Wragg Sykes*

Reviewed by Megan Stueve

---



London: Bloomsbury Sigma  
2020

Author Rebecca Wragg Sykes truly is a talented paleoanthropologist and storyteller. Her gift for bringing scientific subject matter to the public in a way that is understandable and relatable to anyone is remarkable. Those seeking a full and comprehensive story of Neanderthals could do no better than this book. With such a breadth of knowledge, the author is yearning to share what she knows. At times the number of footnotes can be distracting, but most often she is filling in the blanks of the data I didn't know I wanted to know, in fact I didn't know I *could* know.

Scientific data is usually disseminated in 'cold, hard facts' leaving the reader to fill in the blanks and make connections between separate pieces of information. Wragg Sykes writes with a warmth that makes these connections for the reader. She takes the cold facts and weaves together a narrative that provides a fuller picture, complete with a series of color photographs set in the center of the book to illustrate her points. She is careful not to compare Neanderthals with contemporaneous *Homo sapiens* populations; instead, this book is about exploring the variability of Neanderthal life. It is a bit risky—some may say naïve—to avoid the notion that Neanderthals may have learned some of

these abilities from interactions with *Homo sapiens*. However, it is rather brilliant for someone to finally write a book allowing Neanderthals to stand on their own without such a constant comparison.

Every chapter begins with a delightful preamble that sets the scene for the reader to connect with the information presented, much in the same way as many other favored public science authors. The first chapter is used to quickly provide the background of the discovery of the first *Homo neanderthalensis* skull, the ensuing debate about its location in the chronology of time, and the nineteenth century realization that *Homo sapiens* were not the only people to have once populated our planet. Chapter two provides a brief understanding of the remainder of our evolutionary tree, spanning some six million years. Following are two chapters describing the fossils that have been unearthed and how they have changed the way we perceive of Neanderthals: no longer as hunched over and brooding cave men, but instead they look, speak and act very similarly to *Homo sapiens*.

Chapter five is where we see a dramatic shift in the author's writing style. Wragg Sykes begins by writing about the environment that Neanderthals lived in. She reconstructs the past environment as it shifts from glacial to interglacial and back again as if she were there to observe it herself and is providing her direct account of any century, year, season or day throughout the entire span of their time on earth. As we move through the book, she continues to write in this manner, describing lithic technology, wooden and bone tools, hunting and butchering skills, even the layout of the Neanderthal housing structure (chapters 6-9) as if she were a living witness millennia back in time. Subsequent chapters broach the subject of cognitive capacities by touching on the creation of artwork, planning future events, collection of pretty objects and vastness of mortuary practices (chapters 10-13) with the same personalized finesse.

The book ends with a few chapters on the more recent advancement in DNA genome sequencing and its implications for future research (chapters 14-16). While scientists can already trace Neanderthal lineages

and watch them as they migrated multiple times from Europe into Asia, with time, technology can only show us more. She humorously cautions about Frankensteinian scientists mixing Neanderthal/*Sapiens* hybrids in laboratories while simultaneously showing the reader real examples of hybrids from 60,000 years ago.

Her most successful feat with this book is limiting her use of nomenclature. The reader is free to imagine themselves as part of a hunter-gatherer lifestyle in harmony with nature, hunting based on taste preferences, leisurely crafting objects, and trading with other social groupings. You can see yourself eating mussels, roasting auroch stew, tending to young, and digging up roots—but it isn't you, it isn't even your species. It is that which you have separated yourself from by name alone, but which you inevitably realize as your kin, your kindred. It is only afterwards you are reminded that for nearly 150 years they were pit against you as subpar and subhuman, when in reality they were very much like you.

Wragg Sykes' reconstructions demonstrate that there was no apocalyptic event that wiped out the Neanderthals. There was no loss of food source, climatic conditions they couldn't adapt to, or major war with *Homo sapiens* that caused them to die out. They were a widespread species that were not all confined to bitter cold and starvation. They lived in all climates, enjoying beaches and sunshine as well as mountains and snow. There was as much cultural variation between them as we have today. Small pockets of them bred with our ancestors and their blood runs through our veins. She jokes that perhaps a paleolithic pandemic took care of the rest but as for current evidence we'll just have to keep digging.

I close as the book began, "The most glorious thing about the Neanderthals is that they belong to all of us, and they're no dead-end, past-tense phenomenon. They are right here, in my hands typing and your brain understanding my words. Read on, and meet your kindred."



**Megan Stueve** is a research archaeologist at Desert Research Institute in Las Vegas, Nevada. She has research interests in Neanderthal thanatology, human impacts on the ancient environment and Southwestern Archaeology.

Author email: [mstueve@eastern.edu](mailto:mstueve@eastern.edu)  
or [megan.stueve@dri.edu](mailto:megan.stueve@dri.edu)

---

## BOOK REVIEW

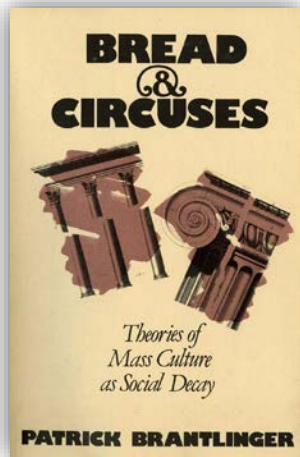
---

### Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay

*By Patrick Brantlinger*

Reviewed by Jacob Winn

---



Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press  
1983

In *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay*, Patrick Brantlinger explores the myriad ways in which so-called “mass culture” is considered in relation to cases of believed social decay. Before looking into the writing in significant detail, it is important to first establish a pair of Brantlinger’s preferred phrases which play significant roles in the work. The phrase “mass culture” is a term Brantlinger uses to describe cultural items which are designed to appeal to the masses at large, such as public spectacles, sports, and the mass media. Its antonym is “high culture,” which describes the elitist, aristocratic approach to culture and centers on that which is by and for those atop the societal hierarchy. With those important definitions in mind, we shall now look toward Brantlinger’s argument.

The overall focus of the argument centers around the common notion that mass culture is either a cause or symptom of cultural decline and decay. As is revealed by the title of the book, the Roman notion of “bread and circuses” as tools to placate the masses is used as a frequent point of reference for typical motifs

of mass culture. However, Brantlinger takes a noticeably skeptical tone toward this age-old notion, implying instead that such a conclusion is a concoction of high cultural elites, with little bearing on reality. By looking at numerous examples from both antiquity and more recent times, Brantlinger showcases a number of thinkers who accept the connection between mass culture and social decay, as well as a number of thinkers who reject such an idea.

Of particular interest to me is Chapter 3 of the book, titled “The Opium of the People,” as it deals specifically with the ways in which religion (with Christianity in particular bearing the brunt of Brantlinger’s critique here) interacts with the paradigm of mass culture and social instability. One of the main streams of thought addressed by Brantlinger in this chapter is the notion that religion is both a form of mass culture and a competitor to secular mass culture. The relationship between religion and high culture is similarly described as complicated, with the Christian religion being compared closely or interchangeably with high culture at points, while also opposed to it in many ways (83). However, despite the ambiguous relationship between Christianity, high culture, and mass culture, the majority of evidence provided in the text points to Christianity as much more a form of mass culture than one of high culture. This is exemplified by the notion that Christianity in the classical world was comprised mostly of society’s undesirables, as the great historian Edward Gibbon was keen to demonstrate (87). There has been a common idea in recent centuries that a widespread secular mass culture will ultimately replace religion, as was most famously the hope of Marx. This notion naturally lends credence to the view that religion is decidedly a form of mass culture, since Marx viewed his ideal mass culture as filling the cultural role of religion, which would then become obsolete in Marx’s ideal society.

Brantlinger identifies one more view of Christianity and culture, which goes beyond the mass culture / high culture dichotomy. This view was especially propagated by a group of existentialists, most notably Kierkegaard, and it espoused a hyper-individualistic view of the



Christian life that holds a certain disdain for the crowd, yet no particular love for the high culture aristocracy either (106). Kierkegaard centered the Christian life on the individual, and placed the individual over and against mass culture which the individual must seek to rise above.

Personally, I consider the dynamic between Christianity and culture to be a complicated matter. While there is certainly truth to the notion that the Christian religion has many of the hallmarks of a form of mass culture, I believe there is also a certain degree of merit to the beliefs of Kierkegaard. While our faith caters to the masses, in that it should appeal to the downtrodden and needy and is thus not a high culture in the classical sense, there is also a grave danger in allowing the faith to be somehow subjected to the whims of the crowd. There is something to be said for noting how a mass culture belongs to the masses in the sense that it is subjected to them by their possession of it. I believe this conundrum ultimately reduces down to the dual nature of our Christian faith, in that it is both significantly communal and deeply personal. Because of this, we are forever separated from full inclusion in any one of the camps that Brantlinger describes. Instead, we must seek to find a place of balance from which to offer a hand of compassion to the masses, while nonetheless acknowledging the importance of the individual and each person's role in their own faith journey. Regarding our role in the grand flow of cultural decline and decay, we must not be swayed by fears over whether or not our culture is declining around us. Instead we must focus on fulfilling our callings, both individually and collectively, to the best of our ability.



**Jacob Winn** is a graduate student in Eastern University's Theological and Cultural Anthropology Program. He is also a ministry worker, having spent the past six years involved in ministries of various kinds. He enjoys reading history, philosophy, and theology, and hopes to write extensively in the future. He also has his sights set on a future in academia, in addition to his ongoing ministry work.

*Author email:* [jacob.winn@eastern.edu](mailto:jacob.winn@eastern.edu)

---



The *On Knowing Humanity Journal*  
is a publication of the On Knowing Humanity Research Project  
<https://okhjournal.org/index.php/okhj>

and associated with the  
Master of Arts degree in Theological and Cultural Anthropology  
<https://www.eastern.edu/academics/graduate-programs/ma-theological-and-cultural-anthropology>

at Eastern University  
1300 Eagle Rd.  
St. Davids, PA 19087  
<https://www.eastern.edu/>

For more information, contact the editor: Eloise Meneses  
Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Eastern University  
Director of the MA in Theological and Cultural Anthropology  
[emeneses@eastern.edu](mailto:emeneses@eastern.edu)

The journal was originally funded by the John Templeton Foundation.