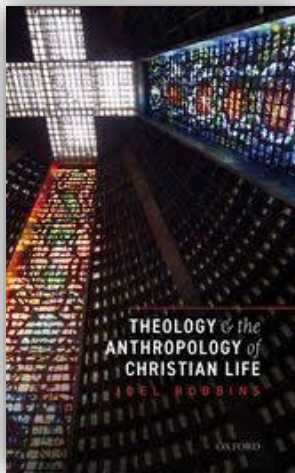


BOOK REVIEW

Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life

By Joel Robbins

Reviewed by Dena Loder-Hurley



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In his most recent book, *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life*, Joel Robbins advocates for a dialogue and exchange of ideas between the fields of theology and anthropology. The introduction begins with an apologetic disclaimer of his limitations in the field of theology and a stated hope regarding the theological reception of his book: “that whenever I do burn myself on issues about the temperature of which I know too little, I’ll do so in interesting enough terms that rather than being tempted to look away in embarrassment, theologically and philosophically informed readers will want to get over the resulting pain with me” (2). This vulnerable posture of humility may endear readers and invite them to entertain his argument with greater curiosity and generosity, a grace seldom extended in academic circles. His admitted limitations do not prevent broad ambitions, including a “transformative interdisciplinary encounter” he hopes to stage, driven by a strong conviction that the time is now (4).

The introduction includes a rich literature review where Robbins acknowledges those already devoted to fostering the exchange, including a mention of *On Knowing Humanity Journal’s* own editor Eloise Meneses and editorial board member David Bronkema. One of the reasons he believes the time is right for the exchange is due to the disruption taking place in both disciplines. Anthropology has developed a relatively recent interest in studying Christianity, and in theological circles, recent developments of “world” or “global Christianity” have moved the perceived center of Christianity away from a predominantly Western orientation. Anthropology’s commitment to “field work” and seeing things from their informant’s point of view theoretically affords anthropologists greater latitude to accept an explanation referencing the power of a divine figure(s), where other fields may have theoretical commitments requiring them to set such explanations aside. Theology, therefore, offers the anthropologist tools to better understand their informants’ motivating factors, theoretical resources, while anthropology offers the theologian a means by which to understand fellow believers from cultures or cultural backgrounds different from their own.

Robbins uses specific theological concepts to facilitate the dialogue, beginning with cultural change due to divinely inspired discontinuity and disruption. Robbins describes the difficulty to describe or analyze radical change in anthropological terms, while acknowledging how many in Christian circles, particularly Evangelical ones, have no difficulty with this concept. From the blind man who miraculously received his sight in John 9 to the Apostle Paul himself who was blinded on the road to Damascus, radical disruption is par for the Christian course. Robbins utilizes this theological concept as a theoretical resource for analyzing his own fieldwork with the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea. Where traditional academic traditions would be prohibited from considering the actions of a divine actor, theology

offers a way to explain or at least understand what has happened, as the Urapmin themselves would understand and explain it.

Robbins also utilizes sin and atonement to explore concepts of failure as either an individual, personal issue or a matter of an external enemy adversary. An emphasis on personal failure often results in a more individualistic focus on increasing strength of character and one's own belief in the struggle against sin. Conversely, the identification of an external adversary necessitates tapping into the power of God as the victor or perhaps severing relationships with those familial ties or relationships that might be hindering that power, a development of the concept of discontinuity within Christianity (68). This differentiation provides much fodder for current conversations about the nature of individual, personal responsibility and a need for punishment and justice, concepts which play out in various theological theories of atonement which can inform the proposed answers to contemporary problems.

Robbins also explores the prosperity gospel, describing how both theologians and anthropologists have penned "troubled response" to its various forms (80). He draws on both disciplines' fundamental views on humanity, citing Clifford Geertz's view that human beings are "incomplete animals" and arguing that "anthropology . . . is a discipline founded on a notion of the incompleteness of the human individual and its lack of self-sufficiency" (98). From this position, he discusses the tendency of anthropologists to suspend judgment as a matter of a disciplinary commitment and the opportunity for anthropologists to learn from theologians about the method for making informed judgements from a place of humility in service to humanity itself. Although anthropologists often advocate for an understanding of cultural formations as making sense within their context and thus not being irrational examples of simple ignorance, there is still a need for ethical considerations and evaluations.

Reading the 167-page book took far longer than I anticipated, mostly because the discussion sparked connections and ideas in my own mind I wanted to explore. For readers already engaged and committed to the interaction, dialogue, and exchange of anthropology and theology, Robbins delivers well, drawing on both fields succinctly yet masterfully. Although some might say the book favors the esoteric, this book will delight those who enjoy playing with ideas and scaling complexity.

Readers of *OKH Journal* will find a kindred spirit in Robbins and his ambitions because the possible interdisciplinary transformations of theology and anthropology have been at the forefront of the journal's mission and purpose from the beginning. What may be perceived as an esoteric interest in wider circles are inherent to the DNA of the journal's editors, writers, and readers. An academic or theoretical commitment to ignore a divine actor is misplaced if a divine actor exists and is acting. Anthropology's primary research question, "What are the humans here doing?" is expanded to include what they believe they are doing. Allowing for the inclusion of belief likewise expands the field and enhances understanding.



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