

NEWS & OPINIONS

OKH Rising: The Rise of the “On Knowing Humanity” Project in the Context of Today’s Anthropology

Edwin Roy Zehner

Abstract

When the initiative eventually named the “On Knowing Humanity Project” was first announced, the present author was concerned about potentially negative impacts on the small but growing community of Christian anthropologists who were beginning to find their place in the discipline after decades of sidelining. Those concerns turned out to be misplaced, as the initiative has been conducted professionally and intelligently. The present article outlines three steps in the initiative’s public introduction and institutionalization. A seminal article in the journal *Current Anthropology* helped to establish the initiative’s scholarly credibility. A book published by noted scholarly publisher Routledge further established credibility, and the *On Knowing Humanity (OKH) Journal* has helped to begin institutionalizing the initiative in a way that has been drawing an increasing range of participants. The present article sets out the author’s initial concerns and then reviews favorably each of these three developments.

Introduction

When I, Dr. Edwin Zehner, first heard in the early 2000s that professors at Eastern University were starting a new initiative exploring specifically Christian approaches to anthropology, I felt distraught. Anthropologists who identified as Christian had contributed greatly to the early development of anthropology as an academic discipline. However, for the previous 40 years or so they had been relatively scarce in the discipline’s mainstream, and anthropologists had also become hostile to, or at least

willfully ignorant of, the concerns of Christian anthropologists and global Christians, while rarely acknowledging the existence of the latter in their field sites [see criticisms by Barker (2008), Robbins (e.g., 1998; 2004); John and Jean Comaroff (e.g., 1991) were earlier examples of anthropologists studying Christians, albeit employing different analytical approaches than would be used later. For expression of concern about the relative absence of Christians from the most advanced discussions and institutions in anthropology, see the latter pages of Priest (2001)].

As the 21st century began, anthropologists began to acknowledge the presence of Christians as an object of study, highlighted the complexities of these groups, and were becoming more open to the disciplinary participation of self-identified Christians [examples include Aragon (2000), Coleman (2000), Coleman and Hackett (2015), Keane (2006), Kipp (1995), Engelke and Tomlinson (2006), and several others]. One of the main concerns that may have remained about Christian anthropologists in the new millennium was whether we Christians were driven by an ideological, or faith, paradigm that might determine the answers to our research questions before the questions were properly studied. In other words, did we Christians possess a preconceived set of biases that would shape and warp our work, and if so, how much would we be driven by our faith agendas and how much would we be driven by the discipline’s norms?

At the turn of the 21st century, anthropology may have been said to be entering a post-post-modernist phase, where the novelty of the postmodern initiatives had worn off and practitioners were deciding how much of those innovations to retain. One of the post-modern influences that I believe has been mostly

retained is the idea that there is no single approach to absolute truths, at least to the kinds of truths that can be investigated through field research and other empirical methods. If some Christian anthropologists and theologians were developing a theologically-shaped approach to the discipline that purported a single approach, then the effort could be perceived negatively in ways that could impact all of us anthropologists who identify as Christian.

These were not idle concerns, as it was easy even for scholars outside the discipline to assume that any reference to “Christian anthropology” meant an attempt to dictate the particular way that the author assumes that Christians should think about anthropology. For example, when Brian M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris (2010) published their groundbreaking cultural anthropology textbook (aimed at students in evangelical Christian colleges and universities), they gave it the title *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective*. When I showed the cover to a Christian colleague of mine (not even an anthropologist, in this case), he objected immediately to the title, assuming that the indefinite article “A” (implying multiple valid perspectives) *really* meant the definite article “The” (implying only one correct perspective). He was probably not alone in his assumption (but incorrect in the case of this particular book).

And such fears of a Christian push toward monolithic thinking may be justified in at least some cases. An organization I know that seeks to reach university students, professors, and academic disciplines for Christ recently hinted what they meant by “reaching academic disciplines” by initiating a series of study guides apparently meant to “equip” professors on exactly how to be a Christian witness in their disciplines. Although this was a very recent development, I think it was fair for me to question whether the earlier initiative from Eastern University was intended to take the same approach. And even if it did not, I worried what effect the initiative might have on the rest of us if the implied pluralist perspective (favored in the social sciences and humanities disciplines that are today the backdrop to anthropology) were perceived by disciplinary specialists to be monolithic.

Fortunately, my fears were misplaced in this case. The *On Knowing Humanity* project that I am referring to has been favorably accepted by secular anthropologists from its very outset, and by now it has been institutionalized in the form of a book of

collected articles and also in the present *OKH Journal*, which has published enough issues to help us assess the founders’ intent. The next few paragraphs outline what I perceive to be some of the main contributions and approaches of each of these materials, both individually and collectively.

Introducing the OKH Perspective—The *Current Anthropology* Article and Its Reception

The On Knowing Humanity project began in 2008 with the formation of a team of Christian anthropologists and theologians at Eastern University to develop a faith-integrated master’s degree in anthropology. However, the time when the *secular* anthropological world became aware of the project can be dated to the appearance of a single essay in the leading journal *Current Anthropology* along with invited reader comments and the authors’ response to the comments.

Titled, “Engaging the Religiously Committed Other: Anthropologists and Theologians in Dialogue” (Meneses et al. 2014), the article was coauthored by five scholars at Eastern University. The article proposed “an epistemology of witness for dialogue between anthropologists and theologians,” and used the example of “the problem of violence” to illustrate the potentials of their approach (2014, Abstract).

The opening paragraph sets out the authors’ epistemological foundations, in the form of two assertions that would probably be accepted by most secular anthropologists:

Since its inception, anthropology has been engaged in two main tasks. The first is the scientific task of seeking to understand the full dimensions of the nature and expressions of humankind. The second, based on the first, is the instrumental task of using those understandings to press for processes, projects, and policies that will protect and nourish the best of that nature and its expressions. (2014, 82).

Another important early assertion is the following:

It is our contention that the depth of anthropology’s perspective on humanity, and therefore the relevance of its instrumental uses, has been constrained by the modernist epistemological assumptions and commitments that have generally governed Western discourse. In particular, the

commitments to secularism and to liberalism, operating in the background of the discourse, have led to the exclusion of religiously based perspectives as intellectually coequal. (2014, 82).

Here, too, few of today's anthropologists would object. One of the main assertions of the "postmodernist" wave that swept through anthropology in the 1980s and 1990s was that the centralizing, secularizing, and homogenizing effects of modernist liberalism must be replaced with something better (see, for example, Harvey 1984). In addition, the "crisis of representation" that accompanied the postmodern wave was a rejection of the monolithic and rationalistic perspectives that secular modernism tended to favor (see also Clifford and Marcus 1986). The result was a discipline that by the turn of the 21st century was much more open to consider religiously-influenced (I avoid the term "religious based") perspectives "as intellectually coequal" than it ever had before.

Therefore, by the time this article appeared the groundwork had already been laid for a positive reception, and the authors' opening was a perfect way of dovetailing with those newer perspectives, which by now had long been mainstream (at least "long" from within the perspectives of a discipline that seems to change its terminology every five to ten years). The article's authors note this fairly recent development, saying that

The discipline [of anthropology] itself is recognizing the time is right to expand its discourse [to include the discourses and perspectives of religiously committed individuals] if it is to fulfill its twin purposes of scientific study and instrumental engagement with its public. (2014, 82)

The article then proceeds to examine secularism and its assumptions, and also its limitations, especially for practicing anthropologists. In particular, secularism's assumption that there is "a transcendent perspective, objectivity, from which reality can be correctly perceived" (2024, 83) has created problems for anthropological researchers and practitioners, especially in recent years (2024, 83), and not just for those who come from non-Western backgrounds. Further,

Steven Smith (2010) suggests that, even in the West, secularism is failing because of the inevitably shallow nature of a discourse that does not permit

the declaration of normative commitments, commitments that must be smuggled in to resolve problems that secular principles cannot work out. (2014, 83)

Before long, it becomes apparent that the term "religious committed other" in the article's title refers not just to theologians and not just to Christians, but also to anthropologists raised in non-secularized cultures (Muslim, Hindu, etc.) and adapting to the secularized assumptions that still tend to dominate in anthropology. In order to develop shared meaning horizons among all these people it is necessary to find ways to accommodate their diverse starting points while still working toward the objectives stated at the outset. As the authors say, this can be hard for those who are used to thinking of secular liberal values as natural and rational, despite the practical difficulties:

At issue is the fear that the elimination of the secular, or rather the reduction of secularism to one doctrine among many, will result in an intellectual free-for-all without grounding or potential resolution. Those already rooted in secularism may well wonder whether an academic discourse is possible under such a circumstance. . . . In part, it is simply a natural response to the realization that one's own perspective has been deeply privileged. (2014, 83)

However, it is not enough to simply abandon monolithic secularism. What kind of stance must replace it? As the authors note:

[W]ith secularism being deconstructed, its unspoken ontological claims will have to be reexamined, and other possibilities reconsidered (cf. Alberti et al. 2011). (2014, 83)

The authors suggest that this is best done through a kind of interactive interpretive hermeneutic practiced within the context of community:

We believe that all understanding is achieved by an interpretive process conducted against the background of a narrative, or "framing story" (Smith 2009). In the context of lived communities, these narratives produce plausibility structures rendering the world comprehensible and meaningful. (2014, 83)

The potential benefits of deliberately interactive hermeneutics can be many, including that:

A thick description [ethnographic style] of our beliefs and operating assumptions for the sake of a transparent and ongoing dialogue with those whose assumptions are different can work toward the end of suggesting how various beliefs illuminate, critique, and expand [our progressive collective understanding of] the subject[s studied]. (2014, 84)

The authors ground these observations in the work of hermeneutic philosophers such as Gadamer, Heidegger, and Habermas. Gadamer grounded the notion of rationality in the speech community rather than the individual (2014, 84). Therefore, while not speaking for all Christians, this set of anthropologically and intellectually oriented Christians (a combination of anthropologists and theologians) argue that people like them, with one foot in communities of committed belief, and the other foot in the community of professional scholars, have a unique contribution to make to anthropology. To quote them again:

We the authors believe that our dual identities as scholars and as believers give us a valuable vantage point from which to contribute to the current debate over epistemology in anthropology. We [the five authors] are Christians working within a socially engaged and intellectually open theological framework deeply shaped by the Christian story as articulated by the earliest strands of the Christian tradition. Our perspective can be described as orthodox, evangelical, ecumenical, and critical in nature. (2014, 84)

Also problematic is anthropology's commitment to liberalism, which while *appearing* to accommodate multiple voices, does so by privileging individual perspectives over collective community ones, thereby narrowing the terms of discourse while further privileging secular stances within anthropology (2014, 85).

That said, the authors' suggestion that Christians, and theologians, can be part of anthropological discourses, was not unique to this essay. As the authors note, they were preceded by the new field of "Anthropology of Christianity," and especially by Jewish anthropologist Joel Robbins, who was among the first to advocate sustained dialogue between anthropologists and theologians (2014, 85; cf. Robbins

2006). Robbins in particular has identified three ways that anthropologists might interact with theology:

(1) By examining theology's historical role in the formation of the discipline [of anthropology], (2) by studying theology for ethnographic purposes, and (3) by allowing theological works to "lead anthropologists to revise their core projects." (Robbins 2006, 287, cited in Meneses et al, 2014, 85; also see Engelke and Robbins 2010)

A similar argument is now martialled against intellectual liberalism, alleging that, same as secularism, the overreliance on this perspective impoverishes the discipline's imagination. As the authors conclude:

Liberalism's overreliance on "reason" ["scare quotes" are my addition] as the final arbiter, along with its rejection of community and tradition in favor of the autonomous individual with free-floating interests, causes it, like secularism, to be overly restrictive of the public discourse [. . . and] distances people from the usual sources of meaning, which are religious and cultural contexts. (2014, 84).

What is the appropriate response to these dilemmas? The authors quote Engelke and Robbins (2010), who suggest that in light of above considerations it is important for

critical thinkers not just to think *about* religion but also in important respects to think *with* it; or at least with some of its conceptual and sometimes its narrative resources. (Engelke and Robbins 2010, 624-625; as quoted in Meneses et al 2014, 85)

These scholars

invoke the work of three contemporary Continental philosophers (Agamben, Badiou, and Žižek) who are constructing models of change that reject incremental progress in favor of radical breaks, or "events." The conversion of the apostle Paul is the archetype for "the event as that which breaks into the present and allows for changes [that] the present on its own could never generate." (Robbins 2010, 649, quoted in Meneses et al. 2014, 85)

With these background principles established, the authors move on to a section outlining “A Christian Perspectival Epistemology” (2014, 85ff). I will devote less space to its specifics, because the authors have already argued the value of multiple such perspectives, presumably including evangelical Christian ones. By forefronting such perspectives the authors are not telling us other Christians how we should think, but are instead setting up the case study with which they close the article. The beginning of this section is worth quoting, however:

In the construction of a broader anthropology, our starting point is that all human attempts to achieve a transcendent vantage point for engaging in the discussion are doomed to failure. This is because no human effort to discover truth is ever free of the limitations of context. We must be willing to engage in the project of understanding humanity by refraining from preemptively privileging any one perspective over the others. This acknowledgement of the limits of human discourse and understanding . . . emerges directly from our theology. (2014, 85)

The authors assert that only God knows absolute truth. And

In biblical history, God reveals truth to chosen people who are entrusted with that truth for the purpose of announcing it to others. The witness does not know God’s truth in totality or from God’s perspective. Rather, the witness delivers the message from the vantage point of his or her own particular time, place, and social position as a *clue* to universal reality (Newbigin 1989:99-100). (Meneses et al 2014, 86)

The authors then link this *theological* position with parallels in the *postmodern* traditions, namely:

In true postmodern fashion, a witness speaks truth from a grounded and specific identity, within the context of a larger narrative that gives meaning to it under the conditions of the hermeneutic circle. (Meneses 2014, 860)

But understanding, or hermeneutics, is not enough. There must also be engagement with God’s creation and especially with socio-cultural realities:

witness is purposeless if it does not break out of the hermeneutic circle [a self-referential cycle whereby text is interpreted in terms of context and context is understood in terms of texts, in a never-ending back-and forth process—see Sherratt (2005)], and make contact with others to deliver the message. (Meneses et al. 2014, 86)

In such a role, properly understood,

Christians are in no way precluded from the excitement, wonder, discovery, and illumination that come from the scientific investigation of the world, anthropology’s first task, and are seriously charged with the proper care of creation and of their fellow creatures, anthropology’s second task. (Meneses et al. 2014, 86)

The authors’ argument also goes beyond this declaration of a right to participate in the discipline. They go on to assert that a “situated perspective” such as theirs (though not necessarily always this one) is essential in order for contemporary anthropology to be done well at all, saying that

[I]t is only from a situated perspective, a view from somewhere, that the truth can be discerned at all, and it is only with the interpretive framework of a community of faith that it can be fully apprehended. (Meneses et al. 2014, 86)

The parameters of the emerging approach are best described with Newbigin’s term “committed pluralism” (Meneses et al. 2014, 86). In such an arena, “discussants must be open to the truth in the other, while at the same time committed to their own truth as having potential relevance beyond themselves” (Meneses et al. 2014, 86).

They choose as an example, “the problem of human violence, both toward one another and toward the earth” as illustration of the advantage of “including religious thinking in the anthropological discourse” (Meneses et al. 2014, 86). Here I avoid a detailed discussion of their specific approach, not only because the authors acknowledge the potential validity of alternative approaches, but also because the presentation is so well done—drawing on both contemporary slightly left-ish mainstream evangelical theology (Croatian-American theologian Miroslav Volf figures heavily in the discussion) and also on the contemporary anthropology of violence towards others

and the earth—including the causes of that violence—that detailed discussion here would take up too much space.

Reader Responses in Current Anthropology

The invited reader comments in that issue of *Current Anthropology* were almost universally positive. While some of the criticisms seem harsh, on the whole they were more positive than most *Current Anthropology* articles receive. In addition, the number of reader responses was unusually large, indicating the high degree of interest that the authors had drawn to their discussion. I now summarize some of these comments.

For example, Simon Coleman of the University of Toronto began with a pair of relevant anecdotes from his own study of a large Charismatic Christian church in Sweden, and used those anecdotes to lead to the questions, “If we [non-Christian anthropologists] are to engage with Christianity in doing anthropology, then whose Christianity do we choose? Just the one that fits most closely with our vision of what anthropology should be—a vision [shaped by] secularism and . . . liberalism?” He also notes, usefully, I think, that “theology is not Christianity per se” (Meneses et al. 2014, 89-90). Many of his questions may have led the authors to feel like they were being “put on the back foot,” if I may be permitted an overused phrase. However, he concludes by saying that his questions were inspired by the brilliance of the piece, “so thank you for that,” among other things (Meneses et al. 2014, 90).

Omri Elisha, of Queens College of the City University of New York (CUNY) referred to the essay as “thought-provoking” and meriting his “utmost respect” (Meneses et al. 2014, 90). Elisha argues along the way, in contrast to the authors, that “theocentric paradigms are qualitatively distinct from ethnographic inquiries, and should remain so (Meneses et al. 2014, 91), and he asserts furthermore that “anthropology and theology are [not] simply two versions of the same conversation” (Meneses et al. 2014, 91). I personally think Omri Elisha mistook the authors to be posing a version of this conversation that they did not actually assert. He sees them as insisting on a revelation through the voice of God, rather than the command to understand and act within the complexity of human societies, which is the position the authors seem to take. In particular, I think Omri Elisha significantly misunderstands the authors when he writes:

The power we have [as humans and as anthropologists] to pose innumerable and sometimes unanswerable questions about the world is different from God’s power to answer them through special revelation. (Meneses et al. 2014, 91)

If I understand the original essay correctly, the authors would have considered themselves to be in agreement with this statement.

Ananta Kumar Giri, of the Madras India Institute of Development Studies, begins by favorably summarizing the authors’ argument and noting ways that it links with some of his own academic concerns (Meneses et al. 2014, 91). He questions whether the Christian notion of “witness,” highlighted by the authors, also includes openness to learning from others (in the authors’ case, I believe it does). Specifically,

They [the authors] . . . write, “witness is purposeless if it does not break out of the hermeneutical circle and make contact with others to deliver the message.” But is this model of witnessing adequate for cross-cultural colearning and dialogues? Is the witness eager to learn from and with the other, including her faith traditions, and not only deliver a message? (Meneses et al. 2014, 91)

I believe the authors’ answer is “yes,” though I see how their phrasing here could suggest otherwise.

This reader goes on to imply that he is reacting more to the perceived history of Christian missions, from Paul forward, than to the actual words of the authors’ text (see Meneses et al. 2014, 35). In addition, this critic repeats the canard (in my opinion untrue) that

Early Christianity, with its loose network of spiritual communities where women played an important role, was more open to other religions and traditions than Pauline institutionalized Christianity (see Chopra 2008). (Meneses 2014, 91)

This assertion is almost certainly false. Paul’s letters and the Book of Acts reveal Paul had a robust view of women’s role in the local churches. Several letters were addressed at least partly to female church leaders (see the end of Romans, for example), and women were assumed to be playing prophetic, proclamation, and teaching roles in the churches, at least at times (see

Acts 2:17-18; Acts 16:11-15; Acts 18:26; Acts 21: 8-9; 1 Corinthians 11:5). Furthermore, the assumption that Paul transformed early Christianity, presumably as found in the Gospels, into something more masculine, is probably false, if not only because the first Pauline letters almost certainly preceded the formal writing of the Gospels. But the critic's account is widely believed, and here it slips into the critic's critique in a manner that suggests the critic was "seeing what he expected to see" rather than "seeing what was actually there" (my terms).

Naomi Haynes, of the University of Edinburgh, observes that recent work in the "anthropology of Christianity" has had a positive effect on the discipline (Meneses et al. 2014, 93):

Ethnographic engagement with Christian populations has expanded anthropological understanding of topics like cultural change (e.g., Robbins 2007) and subjectivity (e.g., Bialecki 2011), to take just two examples. (Meneses et al. 2014, 93)

She goes on to note that

What [the article] proposes is that Christian ideas can help to address some of the more vexing problems of contemporary social science, including the problem of violence. . . (Meneses et al. 2014, 93)

She adds:

Robbins argues that anthropology has lost sight of the ability to speak about otherness in a meaningful way, and in so doing lost much of its disciplinary *raison d'être*, not to mention its political potential. The political possibilities of anthropology are precisely what Meneses and her co-authors . . . seek to reinvigorate in their paper [together with an ethic of love]. (Meneses et al. 2014, 94)

And ends:

What, then, does Christianity have to offer anthropology? Perhaps more than it realizes. (Meneses et al. 2014, 94)

Glenn Hinson, of the University of North Carolina, focuses his comments on relating with religiously committed others in the course of fieldwork. He begins with a strong word of praise for the authors:

Bravery is a quality often attributed to anthropologists, who are still widely seen by the public as adventurous explorers of otherness. Whether or not this attribution is merited, it certainly applies to the authors of this essay, whose bravery rests not in their encounter with otherness, but in their claiming of self, and in their challenging of anthropology's claims to sensitivity and epistemological breadth. In laying bare the discipline's hesitation to unpack its own perspectival presumptions, and in simultaneously identifying the foundational convictions that guide their own practice, the authors invite new conversations about the role of faith in both the field and the academy. (Meneses et al. 2014, 94)

Based on his own field experiences, Hinson sees much value in the authors' approach:

In my own fieldwork, consultants have often pressed discussions into places that they explicitly say they would never approach with one who did not share their foundational religious understandings. They see the sharing of beliefs—at least at some fundamental level—as a covenant that brings not only eased understanding but also a responsibility to representation without retreat. . . . This covenantal understanding . . . both fosters trust and often deepens ethnographic conversations. (Meneses et al. 2014, 94)

This deepening, though, depends on the sharing of beliefs. . . . [even when they] foreground fundamental theological differences rather than similarities. (Meneses 2014, 95)

Furthermore,

How articulating one's faith might affect relationships in the field raises larger questions about ethnographic practice and about the role that the illusion of objectivity plays in ethnography. (Meneses 2014, 95-96)

. . . a point very similar to one made by the five authors themselves.

Brian Howell, of Wheaton (IL) College, an openly Christian anthropologist, is similarly approving, while raising specific questions. Particularly salient for him, in a major portion of his response, are the practical parallels between the authors' pairing of theology with ethnography, and other anthropologists' opposing of

morality against conventional objective ethnography. At the same time, he warns against dangers of proposing any one particular approach as “Christian,” which is an approach that I now believe authors did not intend. At the same time, he points out that appeals for “anthropological militancy” driven by purported moral or ethical impulses are best formulated in terms of specific identifiable traditions—Christian or otherwise—“rather than the . . . generalized ethics of the day.” (Meneses 2014, 96)

David Lowry, of the American University in Washington, D.C., says that the article “is highly needed” (Meneses 2014, 96), noting that “Christian viewpoints contain an expertise that anthropology cannot match” (Meneses 2014, 96), and saying that it calls for “a highly needed interdisciplinary and intellectually open discussion about what faces us as witnesses of human existence today” (Meneses 2014, 96).

James Peacock (Emeritus, University of North Carolina) notes that in expounding “a religiously committed anthropology,” the authors demonstrate “important understandings that are missed by a secular viewpoint” (Meneses et al 2014, 97). He goes on to suggest several ways these points could be extended, while also noting several points where his own writings have paralleled those of the authors.

Robert Priest, then of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, told stories illustrating how the secular academy’s preference for religious non-commitment in public presentations had affected his writing and teaching at various stages of his career. These stresses had created numerous tensions in his career, which he resolved partly by focusing on applied issues such as witchcraft accusations in Africa (Meneses et al. 2014, 97-98).

Joel Robbins, then of the University of California-San Diego, termed the article “highly original,” agreeing with the authors that “conversations between anthropologists and theologians are rare” (Meneses et al. 2014, 98). He noted several ways that such discussions could be productive. At the same time, he notes that the authors seem more interested in intersections with ethnography than with anthropology’s role in generating new theory about human beings (Meneses et al. 2014, 98-99). That said, one of the strengths of the article, says Robbins, “is that it clearly sets out a Christian theological anthropology (a Christian understanding of the nature of humanity),” adding:

One of the great contributions of this article is that it suggests . . . that an excellent starting point for discussion between theologians and anthropologists would be a consideration of their different fundamental anthropologies. Such a discussion, which this article initiates, is one from which both sides might well stand to learn a good deal about both themselves and each other. (Meneses et al. 2014, 99)

Authors’ Response

The authors devoted the bulk of their response not to a point-by-point rebuttal (there was little need for this, in any event), but rather to discussion of ten sets of questions meant to move the discussion further. I will refrain from listing them all, as they can be accessed in the original publication. However, the full list is worth reviewing.

A Step Toward Institutionalization—the Book

The authors did not stop with just one article. Instead they moved on to publish an edited volume with a respected scholarly publisher (Routledge—see Meneses and Bronkema, 2017) and also started the periodical, the *On Knowing Humanity (OKH) Journal*, where the program they had outlined could be carried out.

The book, which proceeds from a conference held at Eastern University in 2015, contains nine (9) essays by Christian scholars plus an afterword by secular anthropologist Joel Robbins. Essays include attention to epistemology, ontology, and other topics. The opening chapter is a reprint of the *Current Anthropology* article discussed above. Subsequent chapters discuss such things as Biblical teaching on “the stranger” as an anthropological resource (Dearborn 2017, 54-70); the project of knowing and being known in ethnography (Howell 2017, 33-53); witness as an epistemology for a committed anthropology (Meneses 2017, 80-100); humility as a motivator for anthropological theory and practice (Backues 2017, 101-130); insights from practical theology for a transformed applied anthropology (Bronkema 2017, 165-179); multiple expressions of the sacred in Andean ontology (Paredes 2017, 175-187); implications of the transcendent for love and purpose in migration (Ybarrola 2017, 188-208); and the Trinity as conceptual tools [plural in the original]

for an interdisciplinary theology of culture (Flett 2017, 209-221).

In their introduction to the book, Meneses and Bronkema (2017) note that they have brought together five anthropologists, three theologians, and a historian to “develop a new set of conceptual tools informed by insights from Christian theology to be used analytically in anthropology” (2017, 1):

Together, we investigate the possibility of using theological understandings of what it means to be human living in a world that has more to it than meets the secular gaze to enlighten and enrich anthropological conversations about both theory and method [by drawing on our identities and intellectual resources as Christians]. (Meneses and Bronkema 2017, 1)

They consciously build on “anthropology’s expansion in recent years to include voices from the others it is studying,” citing several leading trends that have helped to open this kind of discursive space (Meneses and Bronkema 2017, 1). The effect has been to open the door to “scholars with religious commitments . . . to speak in their own terms of what they see to be the value of anthropology in illuminating the human condition” (Meneses and Bronkema 2017, 1).

The editors then reference the origins of the On Knowing Humanity Project at Eastern University, list the contributors to the volume, and detail the contributions made by each. They also justify briefly the decision to include only Christian scholars rather than representatives of other religious traditions (Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims, for example), although they imply indirectly that the collection might have been further enriched by such contributions. They then make the strong statement that “what ties the chapters together is a conviction that the field of anthropology as it stands lacks the explanatory power needed to elucidate its own subject matter” (Meneses and Bronkema 2017, 1). The introduction also

grounds this effort in the work of anthropologist Joel Robbins (Robbins 2006; Engelke and Robbins 2010) and theologian John Milbank (2010), and parallel developments (Meneses and Bronkema 2017, 3).

Further Steps—The *OKH Journal*

Around the same time as the edited volume appeared, the authors, led by Dr. Eloise Meneses, went on to found a new journal, the *On Knowing Humanity Journal*, devoted to further institutionalizing their initiative. I consider this journal to be the real genius of the project. The *Current Anthropology* article established scholarly credibility, and the book further built on that credibility, while the journal really began showing the approach’s potentials in practice. As of the writing of this article (June-July 2023), the journal was in its seventh year, having produced its first issue in 2017.

The journal could not have been easy to start.¹ The initiative was still relatively unknown, and the journal initially had to rely heavily on contributions from the authors and their current and former students—not that this meant a failure to produce quality work. By now, however, the journal has been able to attract a much broader range of authors—still mostly Christians, but no less valuable for that—and has published on a broad range of topics, thereby standing for the broad range of issues on which Christian perspectives can be brought to bear.²

A sampling of issues discussed may help give a sense of the journal’s breadth. The most recent issue (Volume 7, Number 1, at the time of writing) included articles on Kabbalistic Jewish mysticism (Pittle 2023); Hausa women of Kano, Nigeria (Myland 2023); Pentecostal prosperity messaging in Southeast Nigeria (Nwadiakor and Nwakocha 2023); and an analysis of the treatment of suffering in evangelical Christian songs and hymns, an analysis that drew on material from the United States, Britain, Australia, and Thailand (Zehner 2023).

¹ This statement is based partly on personal experience. I have played a role in starting two scholarly journals. One of them, *The Journal of Burma Studies*, began with difficulty but has gone on to establish itself well, with institutional buy-in from scholars at multiple universities. The other, *Walailak Journal of Asian Studies*, had an even rougher beginning, and it never published a second issue. The difficulty of starting *OKH Journal* has been confirmed by electronic communication with Eloise Meneses, who poured a great deal of time into ensuring that the initial issues were of good scholarly quality.

² In a way, this journal, and indeed the entire project, is a response to Mark A. Noll’s call, in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, for work thoughtfully relating the best of Christian thought to the best issues in their respective disciplines (see Noll 1994).

Earlier issues touched on issues and phenomena such as the role of relics and icons in healing, conversions, and miracles (Darrell Pinckney); a Santeria community in the southern United States (Tony Kail); Emerging Christian witchcraft (Jeremy McNabb); an examination of salvationism (Jacob Winn); and a program for the assimilation of convicted felons (Autumn von Hindenburg), all in Vol. 6, No. 2. Other issues included an issue focused on sex, family, marriage, and the church (Vol. 6, No. 1), including an important exchange on sex and marriage between Robert Priest (Taylor University) and Jenell Paris (Messiah University).³

Still earlier issues included articles on the church and Black Lives Matter ; race reconciliation in white southern churches; missiology and anthropology; and healing and religion, in Vol. 5, No. 2; as well as thinking anthropologically with Jesus and Paul; and individualism and collectivism in community development in Vol. 5, No. 1; and Africans in America; international and customary adoptions in Vanuatu; and climate change during the Little Ice Age in Vol. 4, No. 2; and more.

Closing Remarks

On Knowing Humanity (OKH) has already proven to be a valuable addition to both anthropological and evangelical Christian discourses. Not since the 1950s initiation of the journal *Applied Anthropology* has there been a journal specifically serving the junction between anthropology and Christian concerns. Today, in the form of the *OKH Journal*, we see that the interests of that juncture have broadened significantly. Whereas the earlier journal addressed primarily missiological issues, the current journal also, even primarily, addresses issues of contemporary social significance, both domestically and abroad.

The mere existence of such a range of scholarship in the early pages of this journal should also demonstrate definitively that this is not a one-size-fits-all approach to “Christian anthropology,” perhaps the primary concern of most critics, but instead is an approach that forefronts a growing range of Christian voices. The efforts of this project’s founders are to be lauded, and I look forward to seeing what kinds of

additional socially- and theologically-engaged scholarship they encourage into being.

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³ Priest’s initial article was multi-valent, being titled: “Faith Integration and the Outrageous Ethic of Sex Only in Male-Female Marriage: Towards an Anthropology of Sex and Marriage for the Christian Community” (Vol. 6, No. 1). As is often the case with Priest’s work, the article has to be read in detail to appreciate the integrated complexity of his arguments.

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Edwin Roy Zehner has a Ph.D. in Anthropology from Cornell University (2003) and is former Lecturer and Chair in the Ph.D. Program in Asian Studies at Walailak University in southern Thailand. Dr. Zehner is a specialist in Cultural Anthropology, Linguistic Anthropology, Thailand and Southeast Asian Studies, and the Anthropology of Comparative Religious Communities. He has published more than thirty (30) scholarly articles in Thai and English. He is also an alumnus of the Christian organization Global Scholars, although the opinions and perspectives presented here are entirely his own.

Author email: ezehner1@gmail.com
