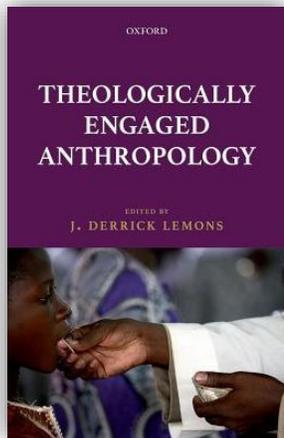


## BOOK REVIEW

# THEOLOGICALLY ENGAGED ANTHROPOLOGY

*Edited by J. Derrick Lemons*

Reviewed by Paul Houston Blankenship



Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press  
2018

In 2006, Joel Robbins wrote an article entitled “Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship?” In that article (Robbins 2006), Robbins reflects on the epistemological questions the burgeoning field “the anthropology of Christianity” raises for the discipline of anthropology itself. One question Robbins explores concerns anthropology’s “awkward” relationship to theology. Historically, Robbins recognizes, anthropologists have engaged theology with suspicion. Because of the enriching possibilities theology holds for anthropology today, however, he encourages anthropologists to develop a generously engaged hermeneutic. To that end, Robbins charts three routes by which anthropologists might engage theology.

The first route explores how theological ideas shaped anthropology. Robbins considers Talal Asad, who excavated the Christian roots of the concepts of religion and culture, as a pioneer on this path (Asad 1993). The second way to engage theology, Robbins suggests, is by examining the difference theology makes in local Christian worlds. Susan Harding’s *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, which demonstrates how the theology of church leaders shaped the fundamentalist world she studied, is cited as a pioneering study here (Harding 2000). Robbins’ third route into theology is the most radical and uncharted. In response to how he perceives John Milbank’s *Theology and Social Science* (2006) to “mock” anthropology for its unwitting entanglement in and perpetuation of ontological violence, Robbins proposes that anthropologists find inspiration in theology to discover social ontologies in the field that might engender hope and flourishing.

Robbins’ article was deeply influential. It animated a now lively and robust conversation about the difference theology can make to anthropology.<sup>1</sup> The latest iteration of this conversation is a volume edited by J. Derrick Lemons entitled *Theologically Engaged Anthropology*. In this brief review, I describe the nature of this fine volume and render some of the contributions it makes. I conclude by putting my finger on the proverbial map between the worlds of anthropology and theology to chart a route I think the community of scholars engaged in the conversation should take for its next project.

*Theologically Engaged Anthropology* responds to two interlocking questions: what can theology contribute to cultural anthropology and what can anthropology contribute to theology? These questions were explored by prominent anthropologists and Christian theologians at two conferences: one in

<sup>1</sup> For example, see: Philip Fountain and Sin Wen Lau, “Anthropological Theologies: Engagements and Encounters,” *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24/3 (2013): 227-234; Joel Robbins, “Afterword: Let’s Keep It Awkward: Anthropology, Theology, and Otherness,” *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24/3 (2013): 329-337; Eloise Meneses, Lindy Backues, David Bronkema, Eric Flett, and Benjamin Hartley, “Engaging the Religiously Committed Other,” *Current Anthropology* 55/1 (2014): 82-104; Eloise Meneses and David Bronkema, eds., *On Knowing Humanity* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Rane Willerslev and Christian Suhr, “Is there a place for faith in anthropology? Religion, reason, and the ethnographer’s divine revelation,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8 (2018): 65-78; Tanya Luhrmann, “The real ontological challenge,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8 (2018): 79-82; James Bielo, “Anthropology, Theology, Critique” *Critical Research on Religion* 6/1 (2018): 28-34.

Atlanta, Georgia, in September 2015; the other in Cambridge, England, in February 2016. The conferences were funded by the John Templeton Foundation to “develop frameworks for a theologically engaged anthropology” (2). Ultimately, what is at stake in a theologically engaged anthropology is, according to Lemons, a better understanding of religion and a fuller appreciation of the spiritual side of humanity (23).

In my view, *Theologically Engaged Anthropology* makes five important contributions to the conversation about the relationship between anthropology and theology. The first is obvious but acutely significant: the conversation is still worth having. Scholars who take the time to read the volume will, as a result, be richly rewarded. Second, *Theologically Engaged Anthropology* further illuminates the often unrecognized influence Christian theology has on the discipline of anthropology. In their chapter, for example, Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. King demonstrate how a core “doctrine” in anthropology about the “psychic unity of humankind” is an explicitly Christian influence (63).

The third contribution is further proof that theology helps shape local Christian worlds and that it is therefore necessary to attend to theology as ethnographic data. In the first chapter of the book, for example, Lemons’ demonstrates how attending to relevant theological debates helped him understand how the Wesleyan church became missional and take a position on same-sex marriage (27).

The fourth contribution this volume makes is in how it demonstrates that theology matters not just as ethnographic data but for anthropological theorizing. In his chapter, Don Seeman suggests that theology can help anthropologists break out of their “cultural and ideological interpretative straightjackets” (350) to better render and explain what they have experienced on the “shores of lived experience” (345).

A fifth contribution I want to highlight is related to the third route Robbins’ 2006 article charted for anthropologists to engage theology, but which remains the road less traveled. In *Theologically Engaged Anthropology*, Robbins proposes that theologians and anthropologists enter into a potentially transformative dialogue about how to render promising judgments about social worlds (242). This is a helpful vision for continued and reciprocal engagement between anthropologists and theologians, and one that might actually matter in the everyday worlds they are ultimately committed to.

As a whole, Brian Howell’s chapter is essential to the conversation. He reminds us that theology is a contested universe comprised of theologies rather than a unitary theology. What *kind* of theology an anthropologist chooses to engage, therefore, Howell writes, will influence anthropological thinking (33). Sarah Coakley makes a similar point in the afterword.

The Christian theologian further troubles simplistic understandings of theology. Defining theology as “faith seeking understanding,” for example, she writes, fails to account for the fact that many theologians aren’t actually people of faith seeking understanding (368)! While Coakley is pessimistic about the possibility of a “generic, essentializing” definition of theology, she suggests that it would be useful to conceptualize theology within a “family of resemblances” (371-372).

In light of the demand for theological complexity and the question about “which theology for anthropology,” I want to suggest a particular kind of theology that would be useful to further explore Robbins’ road less traveled: that is, how anthropologists and theologians might engage with one another to render promising judgements about social worlds and find ontologies that produce real hope and peace rather than violence. The kind of theology I want to suggest is akin to Timothy Jenkins’ vision in this volume where he writes that “theological critique is not usually written for the pleasure of philosophers, but in order to rectify specific forms of practical life” (119).

In *Suffering*, Dorothee Söelle wrote that the task of theology is best described as the imperfect attempt to render life intelligibly so that it can be loved (1984: 8). One of our great contemporary theologians, Wendy Farley, writes of theology not as faith seeking understanding but as pain seeking understanding. What is ultimately at stake with the practice of theology, according to Farley and Söelle, is not rendering timeless metaphysical answers but an immediate presence that can help “throw one’s mind and heart toward the eternally Erotic Abyss that is our heart’s desire” (Farley 2011: 1-2). In this vision of theology, reason is a servant to love and the task of theology is to help the world experience less suffering so that it can become more free to be itself.

I suspect that most Christian anthropologists are motivated to love a world rather than merely understand it. To be sure, that requires challenging what we think love is, not to mention how we imagine the world. Still, Christian anthropology should remain anchored in the painful and perplexing question about how to love the strangeness that compels us. We should remain anchored in a theology, that is, which refuses Love’s subordination.

Engaging *this* kind of theology forces us to turn Howell’s question around and ask which anthropology will best inform our theological responsibility. Without much space to elaborate, I find Nancy Scheper-Hughes’ “ethically engaged anthropology” very promising. In her vision of anthropology, which is similar to the one James Bielo writes about in his chapter in *Theologically Engaged Anthropology* (152), our fieldwork and theorizing must be rooted in our ethical responsibility to the Other.

Let me conclude by putting my finger on the proverbial map between the worlds of theology and anthropology to help chart its next route. Jon Bialecki suggests that anthropology and theology must remember that they are different disciplines and focus on what their differences might produce around shared problems (158). For their next project, anthropologists and theologians should meaningfully engage the shared problems of a local world that might benefit from anthropological and theological attention. In so doing, perhaps they will better illuminate that world and help render a presence that is truly good for it. Perhaps they will find words for the real difference and real hope our species needs to survive. In our troubled waters, which have carried us near the edge of extinction, we need all hands on deck.

## References

- Talal Asad. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press University Press.
- Wendy Farley. 2011. *Gathering Those Driven Away*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Susan Harding. 2000. *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- John Milbank. 2006. *Theology and Social Science*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Joel Robbins. 2006. Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship. *Anthropological Quarterly* 79/2: 285-294.
- Nancy Scheper-Hughes. 1995. The Primacy of the Ethical. *Current Anthropology* 36/3 (1995): 409-421.
- Dorothee Söelle, 1984. *Suffering*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.



**Paul Houston Blankenship** is a PhD candidate at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. His dissertation, *Soul Suffering*, is an ethnography on the spiritual lives of people experiencing homelessness in Seattle. Paul has taught theology and religious studies at UC Berkeley, Seattle University, and Fordham University.

Author email: [pblankenship@ses.gtu.edu](mailto:pblankenship@ses.gtu.edu)

---