

THE VITAL ROLE OF CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN DEVELOPMENT OF THEOLOGY

by

Robert H. Munson

Abstract: This paper considers the role of anthropology, particularly cultural anthropology, and its importance in theology. Utilizing some of the ideas of Hans Frei, the paper also supports the greater importance of cultural analysis of sacred texts over historical analysis, and, utilizing the terms of Frei, the value of a hermeneutic of description over a hermeneutic of suspicion. This paper supports the idea that all theology is contextual and thus gains from the study of the culture in which the theologies is embedded.

Theology, the “study of God” is tied strongly to Anthropology, the “study of Man.” Theology has cultural anthropology as a powerful tool (perhaps most powerful tool from the human sciences), particularly because it assists in bringing revelation to context in a way that is intelligible. Revelation (sacred Scripture) has often been studied historically. But culturally or contextually may be a more important way, as it ties to the development of theology. Consider the quote by Hans Frei:

I am persuaded that historical inquiry is a useful and necessary procedure but that theological reading is the reading of the text, and not the reading of a source, which is how historians read it. Historical inquiry, while telling us many useful things, does not tell us how we are to understand the texts as texts. I am persuaded that in the search for an answer to the question of how to understand the texts as texts, the closest discipline to theology is not history at all. When I ask what external discipline is potentially most useful in theology, I come up with an answer that surprises me, and it is in a certain kind of social anthropology that bears some relationship to a kind of literary inquiry also. Why? Because I take it that Christianity, on which theology reflects, is first of all a religion. It is not a network of beliefs, it is not a system, first of all. It may be an intellectual system also, but not in the first place. Further, it is not first of all an experienced something, an experienced shape, an essence. Rather, it is first of all a complex, various, loosely held, and yet really discernible community with varying features— a religious community of which, for example, a sacred text is one feature that is typical of a religion. And the sacred text usually (and certainly in Christianity), in the tradition of interpretation within the religion, comes to focus around a sacred story. The word sacred is terribly loaded, let's simply say it focuses around a central story, certainly in the Christian religion, in the Christian community. It is this kind of approach that I discern in looking at religion, the Christian religion, not under any high-powered comparative system, but under the aegis of the rather humdrum science, anthropology.¹

Considering the above quote, theology is tied to sacred text and to a faith community. To develop theology requires understanding of the faith community and the understanding of the sacred text as it exists in the faith community. Consider the case of Christianity.

- Christianity is a religion. Religions are an area of study of cultural (social) anthropology.
- A faith community is a culture (or sub-culture) and as such is understood anthropologically.
- A sacred text provides meaning to a religious community and has meaning bestowed on the text by that same community. As such, understanding the text is, in part, a cultural anthropological activity.

Often theology is seen as being assisted more by historical analysis (or philosophical/critical analysis) rather than cultural analysis. Historians like to look at a text as source material for analysis. However, understanding a text in terms utilizing the tools of the historian is fraught with problems when it comes to sacred text... such as the Bible.

The problem is that historical analysis is built on presumptions that are problematic in most religions... including Christianity. Historical analysis seeks to find meaning in past data based on the presumption of natural (and local) progression and causation. This seems fairly reasonable. But what happens when it comes to sacred texts? Consider the question of the historicity of the resurrection of Christ. Historical analysis starts from the assumption of naturalistic phenomenon from naturalistic causation. Therefore, it is ill-equipped to deal with the miraculous (unless of course the proper response is rejection). Likewise, the Bible points to an eschatological history— God working in and through history with a long-range active plan. This implies a plot to history... placing itself more in the area of literature than history. History books have authors, but the assumption of these same books is that history itself has no author. Additionally, and for similar reasons, historical analysis cannot deal with predictive prophecy, unless it is to reject any such predictions as more than educated hunches.

If this is not obvious, consider the following: Suppose a researcher was writing a history of the stone images on Easter Island. Suppose further that this same researcher finally turned in his findings for peer review. According to him, in approximately 1325AD, a miracle happened and all of the statues suddenly appeared on the island. Such a viewpoint would never make it through peer review. It might make it onto the Internet or an episode of “Ancient Aliens,” but little more. For historical analysis, there is a presumption that events connect through natural and local causation. Perhaps no one could absolutely deny the, extremely unlikely, possibility that something amazing did happen and the statues suddenly appeared around 1325AD. Rather, such an unlikely possibility would not be considered part of sound historical analysis.

Therefore, theology grounded on historical analysis will inevitably be pulled into a naturalistic worldview. Since a “naturalistic worldview” defines much of what we describe as “modern Western culture,” historical analysis is actually a cultural lens through which the sacred writings are being interpreted. There are, however, other lenses since there are other cultures.

This is, of course, not to say that understanding sacred text is not potentially aided by historical analysis. This is particularly true of the Bible.

- The Bible was written in history, and, in fact, over a considerable period of time historically. This is unlike the view of adherents to the Quran who believe that it existed and exists ahistorically.
- The Bible describes identifiable historical events over a wide range of history. This is unlike the

Book of Mormon that, although written in a historical style, does not link easily with identifiable historic events.

- The Bible emphasizes the relevance of history in its message. This is unlike much of the Hindu sacred texts in which the historical content of the works are not generally seen as particularly relevant to the message.

So historical analysis is an important tool, but not as important as the tool of cultural anthropology.

The Theologian in Culture



Figure 1. The Theologian and the Community of Faith

Consider Figure 1. A theologian working with a sacred text (particularly, in our case, the Holy Bible) must recognize that it is part of the community of faith, providing guidance and meaning for that community, and given its status by that same community. As such it is integrated into a religious culture. Based on that role in culture, what is the theologian's role in this situation? Is it as a dispassionate observer? A community participant? A critical analyzer? The embeddedness of Scripture within the sub-culture of the community of faith demands the tools and mindset of a cultural anthropologist, understanding the text as the text of a faith community first. Historical criticism may have its place, but as a tool is limited by its own assumptions and methodology.

Hans Frei goes on to suggest that there are two forms/methods of social (cultural) anthropology. He describes them as **“hermeneutics of suspicion”** and **“hermeneutics of description.”**

The **hermeneutics of suspicion** has a statement that may be explicit, but is more likely implicit. It is something like this:

“The people say they do _____ because of _____. But the real reason they do it is _____.”

Within the discipline of cultural anthropology, this is considered inappropriate. Cultures with this hermeneutic are filtered through a presumptive model. In other words, interpretation of Culture A is done via the lens of Culture B. There are many different such lenses or filters. Well-known analysis filters are Marxist, Psychoanalytic, or Evolutionary models of behavior. However, every culture has such filters.

The **hermeneutic of description** does not focus on “the real reason” but understands behavior in terms of collective perception of the culture analyzed. The goal is to understand the culture on its own terms... understanding how the community sees its own behavior. For example, In historical Christianity it is common to call community members “brother” and “sister.” If asked, most Christians would probably identify with the symbol of “church as family.” A few might point to the “Fatherhood of God” and their collective status as “joint heirs with Christ” A psychoanalytic model may come up with a very different “real meaning,” to say nothing of myriads of other possible interpretations that are essentially “outsider-based” rather than “insider-based.” Hermeneutics of description (induction without presumption) would be viewed as appropriate normally within cultural anthropology.

An interesting example of the difference between a hermeneutics of suspicion and description is in the area of LAWNS. Why do we have lawns around our houses? I read a theory proposed that we have lawns around our houses because of our evolutionary history. Our primitive ancestors were raised up in the savannas of Africa and that racial memory leads us to desire lawns around our house. That is hermeneutic of suspicion, utilizing the lens of evolutionary psychology.²

However, a hermeneutic of description leads to a different view. Consider three different cultural settings. Culture 1 is in Buffalo, NY when a homeowner some years ago was told that he could not let his yard stay unmanicured. Culture 2 is in a Georgia swamp where an old home there had the area around it immaculately maintained with swept sand. Culture 3 is in Pampanga, Philippines where my wife’s grandmother every day ensured that the area around the house was hard-packed clay devoid of any plants or mess. The interesting thing is that the reason given by each of these cultures for the ideal of relative barrenness around the different houses was the same “Keep away the vermin.” From a hermeneutic of description, pulling in an evolutionary “real reason” is not considered helpful. The Savanna Theory might be good evolutionary psychology, but it is bad cultural anthropology. It is then, therefore, bad theology.

Cultural Anthropology as Applied to Contextual Theology

I think of this part as a bit more straightforward. Cultural Anthropology is important in contextual theology. Consider Figure 2. The Bible comes to us as divine revelation that is embedded in certain source cultures (Ancient Jewish and Hellenistic-Roman particularly). If we accept that the canon of Scripture is closed, and identify that the ancient cultures are dead— no longer existing today, we can say that the Bible from this aspect is STATIC. However, the Bible also exists as translated word within different cultures... particularly the faith communities in these cultures. Since living cultures are DYNAMIC, the Bible in this sense is DYNAMIC, not static. Linking the dynamic community of faith with static divine revelation is a theological or contextual bridge. Since cultures are dynamic that means that theology (at least effective theology) is DYNAMIC... changing.

So how does cultural anthropology impact this very fluid situation?

1. In Biblical Theology. Understanding the Bible, divine revelation embedded in source cultures, requires deep understanding of the source cultures. This is necessary to interpret the meaning of the Bible. Understanding such dead cultures utilizes archaeology (a subfield of anthropology) as well as cultural anthropology, among other tools.

2. In Translation. To translate from one language to another requires linguistics... one of the traditional subfields of anthropology. But solid translation also deals with culture. The Bible must be culturally accessible and relevant to be translated well. It needs to relate to and impact the culture it is embedded in, utilizing recognizable symbols. The tools of cultural anthropology are greatly beneficial here.

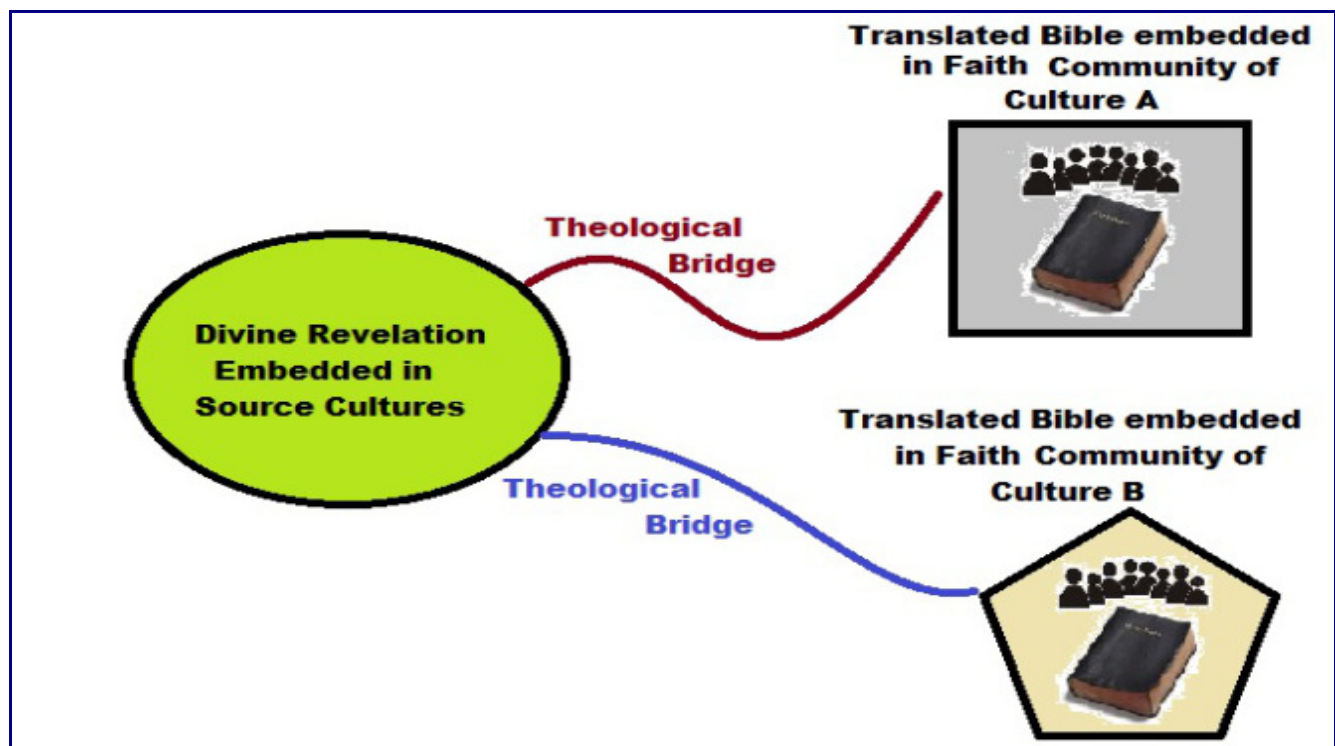


Figure 2. Theological Bridges

3. In Theological Contextualization. A community of faith in a culture can be indigenized (locally accessible and challenging) or it can be foreign and unfamiliar... irrelevant. The message of God needs not only to be translated well, but must be tied to a community of faith with symbols of the local culture. The community must be self-theologizing... dynamically contextualizing God's message and character to the culture. While this may be a local activity, it may benefit from both an emic (insider) understanding and an etic (outsider) understanding. Since the key character of cultural anthropology methodology is "Participant-Observer," bridging the gap between emic and etic, there is much that cultural anthropology can offer in contextualized theology.

4. All Theology. Some act like there is real, unchanging, systematic theology, and then little locally

contextualized theologies. But since the source cultures of the Bible are dead, God's message is always translated and interpreted culturally. All active theologies are contextual. Some do a good job of this... while some do a bad job. Some do contextualization explicitly... while some do it implicitly (often not knowing they do it... an unfortunate thing). Since all theology is contextual, cultural anthropology always has something to say in the activity of theology.³

Conclusions

Theologians, seminarians should be trained in cultural anthropology, as both a subject, and a methodology. Anthropology in general, including the disciplines of Archaeology and Linguistics to Cultural Anthropology provide vital and relevant tools for understanding Scripture, and making it understandable to others. The training is based, in part, on the thought that the tools and perspective of cultural anthropology are more relevant to effective theologizing than many other tools, such as historical analysis, and the various models.

Endnotes

¹ Hans W. Frei. *Types of Christian Theology*, (Yale University Press, 1992), 11-12.

² Consider, for example, Denis Dutton, "Aesthetics and Evolutionary Psychology" In J. Levison (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook for Aesthetics*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³More on the interaction of culture and theology is found in two books my myself. *Theostorying: Reflections on God, Culture, and Narrative* (Baguio City, Philippines: MM-Musings, 2015), and *Ministry in Diversity: Applied Cultural Anthropology in a Multicultural World* (Soon to be published).