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Theology, anthropology, and the invocation to be otherwise

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▪ **Abstract**

One area of tension between the disciplines of anthropology and theology is the question of normativity—an invocation to be otherwise. Some imagine a sharp bifurcation between the disciplines, with anthropologists concerned with thick description of human life-worlds whereas theologians practice a normative endeavour in their attempt to propel their audience toward a desired telos. This article interrogates these assumptions by re-examining the relationship between description and normativity. Through explorations of recent theological and anthropological arguments on these themes, we propose that the relation between these orientations is not as clear-cut as it first would seem. Each discipline has both normative and descriptive impulses, and these are never entirely disentangled. Indeed, we argue that anthropologists and theologians have much to learn from each other about their respective normativities.

Over some years we have participated in a small ad hoc reading group that discussed recent engagements with theology, including works by anthropologically informed theologians, and anthropologists with a lively interest in theology. It has been a good time to have such conversations for, after a period of prolonged neglect, theology has in the last decade re-emerged as a vital stimulus for critical scholarship right across the humanities and social sciences.¹ One of the themes that we have frequently returned to in our discussions is the question of normativity within these two disciplines. By normativity we mean “an invocation to be otherwise”. A normative claim involves the articulation of a desired future moral order, which compels changes in the present so as to facilitate its active pursuit. There are any number of normative discourses operating on us at any given time. These discourses are not restricted to scholarship, but are part of our (frequently unreflective) social imaginary; that is, they are embedded in the legal, political, social, economic, and media matrix within which we live. In contrast to normativity, it is often thought that description aspires merely to understanding present or past dynamics, without any necessary relationship with commitments to a telos, reform, or metanoia.² A crude caricature of the disciplines of anthropology and theology would locate the former as fundamentally descriptive, and the latter as being freighted with explicit normative demands. In this article we argue that although these two disciplines address the question of normativity in different ways, the actual functioning of normative theorisation is more complicated than the stereotype would suggest. Each discipline has both normative and descriptive impulses, and these are never entirely disentangled. We further argue that while normativity is a “problem” in the encounter between anthropology and theology, it is not a problem we wish to see erased. Instead, this problem serves as a valuable heuristic, generating tensions that enable fresh consideration of what resources anthropology and theology bring to bear on their subjects, and in generating the possibility of an ongoing conversation between scholars in anthropology and theology.

Contemporary Christian theology is often thought to be fundamentally shaped by normative impulses: theology envisions a new world and seeks to signpost, illuminate, and beckon a movement in that direction. Theology's power and critical edge are frequently framed by theologians and non-theologians alike as residing in its capacity to articulate an invocation to be otherwise that calls forth action for change. Theologians have a wide range of rhetorical options in which to voice that invocation. Anthropologists, on the other hand, seemingly privilege approaches that proffer thick, nuanced, textured, and detailed descriptions. The heart and soul of the discipline of anthropology today is often regarded as a methodological commitment to ethnography, a tool that facilitates descriptive depth. As disciplines, anthropology and theology appear—in broad, if also fairly pervasive, caricatures of the disciplines—to be pegged to quite distinctive locations on the normative descriptive continuum.

These caricatures are not arbitrary. They point to important dynamics that shape the “cultures” (and “theologies”) of each discipline. Chapters from Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* have served as a ritual rite de passage for generations of undergraduate anthropology majors over the years, teaching students as much through example as argument that good anthropological writing paints a “thick description”.³ For theologians Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, on the other hand, Christian faith has a “transforming vision” that issues a prophetic demand for change.⁴ Nevertheless, there are points at which the caricatures are overly simplistic. In the following two sections we explore ways in which the caricatures fail, before identifying how the entanglement between normativity and description is a productive “problem”.

▪ ***Normative Anthropology***

Perceptive commentators have pointed to the ways in which the normativity description dynamic operates as an axis of difference between the disciplines. For example, it is this observation that lies close to the heart of Joel Robbins' influential article on the “awkward” relationship between anthropology and theology.⁵ In his closing paragraphs, Robbins laments that contemporary anthropology fails to present any “real ontological alternatives” and instead has resigned itself to merely “serving as witnesses to the horror of the world.” Having lost a compelling vision of “radical otherness” that would serve as a “basis for hope”, anthropologists are capable of offering only description. This contrasts with Christian theology—which he sees as a “committed discipline in its very constitution”—which has maintained the ability to insist on the possibilities and potentialities of actual change. Robbins concludes:

Theology . . . possesses a commitment to the reality and force of otherness we [anthropologists] no longer find in ourselves. We should feel mocked then, not of course for our failure to theorize on the basis of a belief in God, but for our inability to anymore show the world how to find hope for real change without him.

For Robbins, theology and anthropology have assumed different roles vis-à-vis normative theory such that, unlike theology, anthropology fails to provide a compelling vision for change, and this lack ensures that the discipline is relegated to the role of mere spectator. Robbins urges for the renewal of a normative anthropology, including potentially via drawing on theological models of otherness, its ethical methods, and its communities of interest. Such description is itself normative in character in that it opens up the possibility of envisaging new possibilities, and then seeks to engage in action to bring them into being. Robbins puts it this way: anthropology's failure is that the discipline falls short of its implicit "critical agenda" which suggests "that anthropologists might convince people to learn from how others live to live otherwise themselves."⁶

Robbins' interpretation of the distance between anthropology and theology is valuable, but it calls for some further complicating. The main conversation partner in his article is John Milbank's monumental *Theology and Social Theory*.⁷ While Milbank would certainly agree with Robbins that theology provides a better vision for hope and change, he would almost certainly disagree with the idea that anthropology lacks normative elements. His sweeping critique regards "secular" social science as undergirded by an "ontology of violence" which results in mistaken description and faulty prescription. Only Christian theology—of a neo-Thomistic variety—can furnish an "ontology of peace" which grounds an adequate description of the world. For Milbank, therefore, the social sciences' problem—anthropology included—is not that it lacks a normative ethics, it is rather that it has a bad one.⁸

Another point of departure, which similarly complicates an easy distinction of theology and anthropology into normative and descriptive camps, is Christian Smith's recent high-octane rant *The Sacred Project of American Sociology*.⁹ For Smith, sociology is a sacred project guarded over by a select group of high priests. While sociological self-understandings rarely attend to the purposes and ends to which sociology aspires, and therefore self-definitions invariably leave out "in order to"

clauses, it is nevertheless the case that sociologists uphold and aspire to particular “normative goods.” Smith argues that it is thoroughly mistaken to assume that sociology pursues a purely descriptive agenda:

American sociology as a collective enterprise is at heart committed to the visionary project of realizing the emancipation, equality, and moral affirmation of all human beings as autonomous, self-directing, individual agents (who should be) out to live their lives as they personally so desire, by constructing their own favoured identities, entering and exiting relationships as they so choose, and equally enjoying the gratification of experiential, material, and bodily pleasures” (emphasis in original).¹⁰

For Smith, therefore, while sociology feigns to describe the world, its choice of topics, style of argumentation, and treatment of heretics, points to the powerful normative impulses shaping the discipline. Sociology’s normativity is problematic for Smith, not because it has clear prescriptions guiding the field, but because these are rarely explicitly acknowledged, or the subject of sustained reflection.¹¹

Smith clearly has an axe to grind, and his work has been critiqued on a number of fronts.¹² There is certainly space to further refine the precise delineation of normative characteristics, as well as examine the extent to which Smith’s target is similar to, or different from, other disciplines and national contexts (Smith’s focus is American sociology). Indeed, while Smith conflates the work of anthropologists within sociology, it is not clear that all of his argument should be regarded as applicable to various strands of anthropological thought. Nevertheless, at a bare minimum, his argument that strong implicit normative inclinations undergird social scientific research will not, we suspect, come as a big surprise to most social scientists, including many anthropologists for whom anthropology is compelling precisely because it is not neutral in regards to its descriptions of the world.

Take, for example, Omri Elisha who, in a fascinating disclosure at the outset of his outstanding study of “engaged Evangelicalism” in the US, frankly acknowledges his own normative ambitions. Elisha discusses how, upon discovering his research among conservative Protestant Christians, friends would frequently ask him whether his research subjects had sought to convert him. Elisha’s response is a form of confession: “I must admit that on some level I probably looked forward to their possible conversions as eagerly as they hoped and prayed for mine.”¹³ Elisha’s missionary impulse calls attention to the desires of anthropologists who not only want to learn about the world but—through their teaching at least as much as their research—want to contribute toward a broader moral project

of reconfiguring the world. Implicit in Elisha's moral project are assumptions of political liberalism and an understanding of the role that social forces play alongside personal morality in bringing about progressive political change.

In addressing these sorts of questions self-reflexive anthropologists often articulate a sense of tension between their descriptive and normative vocations. In the introduction to *The Madonna of 115th Street*, for example, Robert Orsi examines some of these tensions in his wrestling with the possibilities, and limits, of anthropological description. When Orsi's book was first published in 1985 he used the term "popular religion" to describe the phenomena he wanted to investigate. However, in the preface to his third edition, published in 2010, Orsi recounts how he has come to see that term as problematic because it is enmeshed in a particular normative vision of religion that served to blinker his analysis.¹⁴ But Orsi also argues against swinging the pendulum too far in the other direction. He notes that he is not seeking to "defend or endorse" the religious expression which is the focus of his study, and that it is important for anthropologists to be willing to critique violent and destructive religious practices: "Religious expressions like those called popular have been responsible for much personal, domestic, and social grief and turmoil." It is striking that Orsi regards the anthropologist as having a moral obligation to critique practices of violence. It is also striking that even though this normative vision clearly potentially conflicts with anthropology's other pivotal moral task, namely seeking to provide generous space for (religious) diversity, Orsi downplays this axis in his analysis.

In summary, anthropologists such as Orsi and Elisha go beyond mere description and explicitly acknowledge their own normativities. Furthermore, if Milbank and Smith are even partially correct, such normativity has a far wider reach than such rare but explicit remarks suggest; rather, anthropology is pervaded by implicit normative stances. For Milbank and Smith then, the question is not whether anthropology is normative so much as which normative stance it adopts. Robbins does not oppose normativity in anthropology, but rather welcomes it as a hopeful intervention. It is clear then that anthropology often moves beyond naked description into the realm of normative claims.

▪ ***Descriptive Theology***

Paralleling our argument for the widespread presence of implicit anthropological normativity, it is also the case that theology is not a straight-forwardly normative discipline, but rather aspires to its own versions of describing the world. Indeed, Milbank argued that it is only theology that can provide a good description of reality. At the heart of Milbank's argument is that our normativities arise from our (implicit or explicit) ontologies: that is, how we understand and describe the world authorises particular moral claims about how we should dwell in it. Hence ontologies straddle the is/ ought

distinction, such that every attempt at description is also a claim for particular forms of telos. Milbank argues that because, ontologically, only theology can imagine a world pivoting around a fulcrum of peace instead of violence, it alone has the capacity to describe the world rightly.¹⁵

Even without accepting the full thrust of Milbank's delegitimisation of the (secular) social sciences, most theologians would, we think, affirm a descriptive dynamic. We also suspect that very few theologians would accept that their arguments lack descriptive power, and that few would also seek to advance arguments for change without attempting to paint a picture of the past or present conditions which they hope to reconfigure.¹⁶ But the means by which theologians engage with their descriptions is, and remains, a significant methodological question. Certainly, some theologians readily accept that the discipline to date has not been as rigorous as it should be. Among those who advocate a more robust descriptive capacity are a number of recent proposals that have looked to anthropology. We focus on only two such proposals.¹⁷

Sarah Coakley's *God, Sexuality and the Self* contains what we read as a broadside against Milbank's antagonism toward the secular social sciences.¹⁸ Instead of locating anthropological research as a destructive antagonist to her task of constructing a *théologie totale*, Coakley sees creative possibilities for collaboration; indeed, she argues for the "indispensability of fieldwork" for systematic theology and states that "without a critical and discerning use of the tools of social science, theology itself is "beached" in an arid, and often drily disputatious, terrain, one eerily displaced from the turbulent seascape of actual lived religion."¹⁹ That is, without cultivating better descriptive capacities, theology will continue to fail to recognise the world, and its own task, rightly.

In a chapter that examines the practices of the charismatic renewal in the Anglican Church, Coakley draws on participant observation and qualitative interview methodologies to illustrate the possibilities of ethnographic research for theology. She frames her research as an attempt to undertake "fieldwork on the Trinity".²⁰ Anthropologists will probably not be especially taken with Coakley's use of German theologian and sociologist Ernst Troeltsch (a long-standing interest of Coakley's) and his three-fold church-sect-mysticism typology, though the broader question about whether particular forms of doctrine incline toward, or proffer, different forms of social organisation (and vice versa), is as interesting today as it ever was. But regardless of her precise theoretical framework, it is Coakley's active embrace of ethnographic methodologies that we want to highlight.

As with Coakley's work, Michael Banner's *The Ethics of Everyday Life* likewise takes up the theological use of ethnography.²¹ Banner engages in a thoroughgoing critique of theological ethics, arguing that theology has mistakenly taken philosophy as its primary conversation partner, resulting in a tendency toward abstract theorisation of general principles. Banner argues that theology should

instead engage with anthropology in order to ground itself in quotidian affairs in which ethical decisions actually operate. By engaging with social anthropology “moral theology may be deepened, challenged, corrected, and advanced.”²² Anthropology offers theology a better understanding of the world. Banner concludes: “Without becoming social anthropology, moral theology could and should seek to locate its prescriptive imagination of the human in a more fully realized account of the form of life in which this imagination might flourish and pass from prescription to description.”²³

Coakley and Banner helpfully open new space for theological engagement with anthropology. But what is especially important for our argument is the ways in which they construe the two disciplines as separated on a normative-descriptive axis. Coakley is primarily interested in an ethnographic toolkit that will afford new and better insights. While Banner is more nuanced, and while his engagement in anthropology is much more sustained, he remains focused on anthropological optics as a means of shifting theology away from a preoccupation with extreme cases to engaging with the quotidian fabric of everyday life. Thus, anthropology is, for both authors, seen primarily as a methodology for better description: they seem to assume that anthropology simply provides naked description, and this is regarded as quite discrete from any normative anthropological “sacred project”. This stereotypical view risks overlooking the normative “baggage” which anthropological work might introduce into a theological project, and leaves undisclosed questions of the possibility of normative biases in the anthropological lens of choice.

Conversely, for both Banner and Coakley it is theology which exclusively continues to provide the normative vision, albeit one which is more grounded, or better focused, as a consequence of achieving richer and more textured descriptions of the world. This likewise overlooks the descriptive work being done by theology in charting an ontology. The distinctions which undergird these theological encounters with anthropology point to enduring questions about how the two disciplines navigate their differing, yet not reified or static, normative/descriptive inclinations.

▪ ***The entanglement of description and prescription***

The premise of this article is that this cluster of tensions is an especially productive space for analysing anthropology and theology, and their encounters. As we have argued, both disciplines have both normative and descriptive impulses, and these are never entirely disentangled from each other. It is therefore a matter of preference, a question of which is foregrounded and which is located more in the background. Though there is no single set way for either discipline to deal with these matters, each discipline does have certain tendencies for configuring them in differing ways. These differences are likely to remain a perennial source of tension, and therefore also a valuable

impetus for reflection, theorisation, and learning. This is an itch that will be worth continuing to scratch. Rather than deflating these tensions it is worthwhile actively “keeping things awkward”.²⁴

Complementing Coakley and Banner’s arguments for deploying new approaches to improve theological description (including via anthropology), we want to argue for the analytical value of normative theory for both disciplines. Within much theology it is a given that theological ideas make moral claims on our lives. There is an extensive theological tradition of scholarly debate and reflection over what these moral claims are, the consequence of which is to render these claims explicit. One of the areas which anthropology could fruitfully learn from theology is to emulate this process of rendering explicit its normative imaginary. More vociferous debates about the resources, strategies, moralities, and politics of anthropology’s implicit normativities should be welcomed. The hesitancy many anthropologists feel, however, to pursue bluntly prescriptive projects should not be read as a failure in need of correction. Good description does not necessitate straight-forward provision of solutions. One area that anthropology can helpfully serve as a warning to theology is by posing the question as to whether some normative theorisation too easily collapses into crude social engineering. To paraphrase, and slightly rework, Tania Li: an ethnographic appreciation of the complexities of social life may well be antithetical to the provision of clear moral prescriptions.²⁵

Yet while the invocation to be otherwise can legitimately be delayed or temporarily held in abeyance it would be a mistake to let the tensions inherent between normative and descriptive impulses to be erased altogether through the collapse of one of the poles. Description—even good, rich, thick description—is an insufficient response to the world in which we find ourselves. That is, a tactical suspension of the normative may be valuable and necessary at times, but the task of thinking carefully about our normative moral ambitions, and seeking to advocate for another pattern of life, does properly fall into the domain of the scholarly vocation of both theologians and anthropologists. This is not only because our normativities already inhere in our ontologies, but also because by seeking to make a contribution to humanity we participate in a conversation that is intrinsically worth having.

The task of asserting normative moral claims is one that requires sustained reflexivity—or, in theological terms, humility and confession. It is perhaps on this point that anthropology and theology have the most to offer each other. For in the conversation between these two disciplines, questions and challenges are put forcefully to the other that would likely otherwise remain concealed. Both disciplines’ normative considerations may be honed and sharpened through deeper interdisciplinary conversation. We look forward to a continuation of such “awkward” and “problematic” exchanges.

▪ **Endnotes**

¹ We called the reading group, somewhat facetiously, The Return of Theology. We would like to acknowledge and thank all members of the group over the years who endured, and contributed to, our conversations. For a helpful review of the literature that addresses the re-emergence of theology as a conversation partner in critical scholarship, see: Douglas Hynd, “The ‘Return’ of Theology & ‘Religion’: Context, Issues, and Literature,” Unpublished Paper (2017).

² On the unreflective importing of substantive normative assumptions into descriptive categories in social analysis see Doug Hynd, “What’s in a Name? Social welfare agencies engagement with government beyond ‘religious,’ ‘faith-based,’ and ‘secular’ terminology,” *Third Sector Review* 20, no. 1 (2014): 163–84.

³ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

⁴ Brian J. Walsh and Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984).

⁵ Joel Robbins, “Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship?” *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (2006): 285–94. For further discussion of this seminal article see the articles in the special issue on Anthropological Theologies in *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, especially: Philip Fountain and Sin Wen Lau, “Anthropological Theologies: Engagements and Encounters,” *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24, no. 3 (2013): 227–34; Philip Fountain, “Toward a Post-Secular Anthropology,” *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24, no. 3 (2013): 310–28.

⁶ Robbins, “Anthropology and Theology”, 288. It might further be noted that a widespread anthropological axiom that the anthropologist should seek to place their own value judgements about their subjects’ lives in abeyance is itself a norm, which calls for a particular form of engaging with otherness with a desire for this norm to be replicated among others. That the norm is unevenly applied does not negate the sway it has over large parts of the discipline.

⁷ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

⁸ Milbank’s critique includes an extensive discussion of ‘sociology,’ a catch-all label for secular social sciences which includes anthropologists such as Mary Douglas, among others.

⁹ Christian Smith, *The Sacred Project of American Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Smith, *The Sacred Project*, 6–8.

¹¹ Though it is not a far stretch to imagine that Smith would be inclined to launch a fairly similar tirade against anthropology, and, indeed, he discusses the work of anthropologists within his argument.

¹² Among many others, see, for example, Mark Carrigan’s and Stephen Turner’s respective reviews. Mark Carrigan, “Book Review: The Sacred Project of American Sociology,” *The Sociological Imagination* blog, (26

August 2014): <http://sociologicalimagination.org/archives/15920> (accessed 8 February 2018); Stephen Turner, Christian Smith, "The Sacred Project of American Sociology," *Society* 52, no. 1 (2013): 105–10.

¹³ Omri Elisha, *Moral Ambition: Mobilization and Social Outreach in Evangelical Megachurches* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011): 35.

¹⁴ Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010): xxxvi.

¹⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*.

¹⁶ Theology's long engagement with descriptions arising from the application of the historical-critical method provides a well-established example of a descriptive impulse within theology. For an overview of the historical-critical method in theology, see: Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

¹⁷ See also: Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2011); Pete Ward, ed., *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 2012); Christian Scharen, ed., *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 2012); and Christian Scharen, *Fieldwork in Theology: Exploring the Social Context of God's Work in the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015). The recently established journals *Ecclesial Practices* and *On Knowing Humanity* promise possibilities for a sustained transnational conversation. Other relevant approaches include: Charles Marsh, ed., *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method Styles and Pedagogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002); and Luke Bretherton, "Coming to Judgment: Methodological Reflections on the Relationship Between Ecclesiology, Ethnography and Political Theory", *Modern Theology* 28, no. 2 (2012): 167–96.

¹⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 67–8.

²⁰ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 162. The chapter also includes a note of acknowledgement and thanks to the late Mary Douglas "for her friendship and inspiration in extending my argument", footnote 4, 157. Coakley also particularly notes her appreciation for the ethnographies by Timothy Jenkins and Mary McClintock Fulkerson: Timothy Jenkins, *Religion in English Everyday Life: An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1999); Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²¹ Michael Banner, *The Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology, and the Imagination of the Human* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014).

²² Banner, *The Ethics of Everyday Life*, 7.

²³ Banner, *The Ethics of Everyday Life*, 204.

²⁴ Joel Robbins, “Afterword: Let’s Keep it Awkward: Anthropology, Theology, and Otherness,” *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24, no. 3 (2013): 329–37.

²⁵ Tania Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press): 3.