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# Dialogues: anthropology and theology

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The past five years have witnessed an increased interest in a dialogue between anthropology and theology, evidenced in part by a suite of edited volumes (e.g. Lauterbach & Vähäkangas 2020; Lemons 2018; Tomlinson & Mathews 2018). Analyses informed by this interdisciplinary nexus have demonstrated the utility of theological concepts for anthropological inquiry (e.g. Robbins 2020; Tomlinson 2020; Williams Green 2021). The following series of dialogues between anthropologists and theologians builds on this growing body of work, expanding it at two main points. First, while the above conversations are all focused on Christian theology, mainly as a means of engaging Christian practice, our dialogues move beyond this religion. The following conversations engage the intersection of anthropology and Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, as well as Christian, theology.<sup>1</sup> Second, many of these dialogues foreground particular experiences of scholars in both anthropology and theology who identify in some way with the religious traditions they study. Some of these dialogues took place between scholars who had an established relationship; others involved partners who had not previously met, but who agreed to correspond in view of a shared interest in this interdisciplinary dialogue. As a starting point, participants were given a series of questions to orient their exchanges, such as, 'How does faith relate to knowledge in both disciplines?' Conversations mostly took place over email and were later edited with the help of one of the journal editors, Adam Reed, and one of the members of our Editorial Board, Naomi Haynes.

### **The divine happens when the circle is disbanded: a conversation between a biblical scholar and an anthropologist**

On 15 February 2021, the biblical scholar Jione Havea and the anthropologist Matt Tomlinson had a conversation online. Havea is based in Melbourne and Tomlinson in Canberra, lands which have never been ceded by the Wurundjeri and Ngannawal peoples, respectively. Tomlinson had read Havea's work for a research project on contextual theology from Oceania; contextual theologians treat social context and personal experience as the grounds on which one can meet God. In preparation for this conversation, Havea read Tomlinson's resulting monograph *God is Samoan* (2020). Both participants approached the meeting as a *talanoa*, a genre of conversational interaction in central Pacific societies. As the reader will see, some of the *talanoa* was about the nature of *talanoa* itself. The recording was transcribed by Rhiannon Tanner. Tomlinson then edited the transcription to produce a new document reflecting the conversation's themes, checking the final product for Havea's approval.

#### *Contributors*

Jione Havea (JH)

Matt Tomlinson (MT)

#### *Conversation*

(MT) I've been reading a lot of contextual theology and contextual biblical studies through an anthropological lens. Your work stands out for two reasons. First, you've published extensively, with several monographs, around twenty edited volumes, and collaborations with many other theologians. Second, your interests are expansive. You write about Old Testament texts, culture and society, identity, sex and gender, dialogue, colonialism and postcolonialism, justice, and other topics.

In the book of yours that I know best, *Elusions of control*,<sup>2</sup> you draw on Derrida, Jameson, Ricoeur, Foucault and other theorists. My first question is how or if you see anthropology in relationship to your work. Does anthropology offer anything to theology and biblical studies, and if so, what?

(JH) That's a heavy question. Let me answer in a kind of roundabout way – in *talanoa* fashion. I do think that anthropology and theology sit under the same umbrella of sociological study. But i<sup>3</sup> want to say first that any discipline, any theory, including the works of anthropology, can be helpful. It depends on who is the practitioner. For example, i would criticize Margaret Mead from the Samoan situation, even though the ethnographic element is very helpful for us. But you know, some theologians are equally bad.

There is crossing or borrowing from anthropology in my theology, but it's a question of how it's done. I just had a conversation with a Māori colleague about how *pakeha* [European, 'white'] anthropologists have packed – this is her language – they have packed the bag for Māori, and they control both the bag and what goes into the bag. So for my Māori colleague, what needs to be done is, well, let's just weave a new bag and let Māori pack their own stories. When white anthropologists or historians pack the Māori bag, they do so for a fragile white readership: that is, for readers who can't handle the messy, filthy accounts of the savageries of their noble forebears. Whereas she as a Māori wants something that shows the savageness [courage] – how her people are resistant and enduring.

(MT) When I was at the Samoan theological colleges [Piula Theological College and Kanana Fou Theological Seminary], you know, I'm not an atheist, but I'm not a member of their churches, either. But they didn't worry about my religious identity. They wanted to make sure I wasn't Margaret Mead. They wanted to make sure I wasn't going to come and say, 'Let me tell you what *fā'asāmoa* [the Samoan way] is!'<sup>4</sup>

(JH) Yes. That's it. Anthropology as a discipline is a good thing, but there are certain anthropologists that we are nervous about.

(MT) So, for a sort of generic anthropologist, who might mean well but might be missing a lot, what's the kind of theology you think they should read? Especially if we're interested in cross-cultural relations.

(JH) That's a very political question, eh! I've read some of your work, and there are theologians whose work you discuss like Ama'amalele Tofaeono and Upolu Lumā Vaai who began as systematic theologians but now do contextual theology, if you want to use that label. But i would quickly qualify that i think contextual theology has become a 'white' project. Because in practice, it's a way of getting us natives – i prefer the term 'native', or 'brown people' – to appropriate a Western theological way of thinking, but giving it credibility. We say, 'Oh, we are contextualizing', but in the end we are also giving our bag to this language. Some of us are getting into public theology as well.

So, what kind of theology? Contextual and public theologies would be engaging for anthropologists and so you can talk back. Theologies are opportunities for people to talk back.

#### 4 DIALOGUES

(MT) Something that strikes me about contextual theology is that by emphasizing culture as a basis for knowing God and doing theology, it can destabilize the culture concept in some ways. Yet in other ways, students get forced to account for themselves in terms of culture. Both you and Jenny Te Paa Daniel have written about students being told, 'Hey, you have to write contextually. You're from Tuvalu, you have to write about climate change, because that's your social concern.'<sup>5</sup> It seems to me that can become a dead end for students.

(JH) Yes, but also, i don't want to fall into this nativist drive, where only the Samoan can write about Samoan things.

Jenny's right. And for me, this is part of my commitment. This is what i drive at in the Oceania Biblical Studies Association and in other *talanoa*: that we have to do it, we have to do it for ourselves and for the next generation, otherwise (and pardon my language) some white person from Europe will come and do it for us. And then he or she will go back to Europe and be the authority on these things. Which is not their fault. It's our fault for not doing what we need to do. We need to speak on behalf of our context as well. So it's a little complex.

(MT) My next question is about *talanoa*, because you've written as much as any theologian about it. You've written that *talanoa* is the conjunction of a story, its telling, and conversation about it. It's open-ended and requires active engagement. But you've also written that sometimes when we say we are having a dialogue, we simply talk over each other – and some voices don't get heard when we call for more dialogue.<sup>6</sup> So, I wanted to ask you for more thoughts about *talanoa*. Who do you see as your partners in *talanoa*? What kinds of limits have you encountered in *talanoa*?

(JH) My partners go back to the kava-drinking circle, as you know from your own experiences in Kadavu, in Fiji. Also to the boys in prison [Havea has experience with prison chaplaincy], and all the way into church communities and conferences.

My unfolding of what *talanoa* is has changed over time. I remember the first piece in which i wrote about *talanoa*, i focused on story and telling. I mean, conversation probably came third or fourth place in it.

If it's the president of my church who calls for *talanoa*, nobody will speak up! So it depends on who is doing the *talanoa*. You can come as an expert and shut people down. Or you can come as an expert and open things up. So it depends on how it's done and what the relationship is.

As you know, it's the same in Kadavu. Same in Tonga. There is power, status, class, that influence how *talanoa* take place. But it also depends on the subject matter – the story you are having the *talanoa* around. For example, in the Uniting Church in Australia, the Pacific Islanders will say, 'Let's not talk about this issue of sexuality, because our people don't like to *talanoa* across gender. Male and female can't sit down together in a room and have this conversation'. But every time i raise it with women, they've been quite open to talk about it even though i'm not a woman. And in many cases where there are male and female, when we have engaged in this taboo subject, people are open to it. But, you know, if you bring the president of the church in again, nobody's going to speak up.

One of the things i've been annoyed with lately is, you know, the United Nations has a '*talanoa* process' now.<sup>7</sup> Since i heard about it, i've told Nāsili Vaka'uta and others that we need to bring *talanoa* back. Because once the UN takes this over it just becomes Westernized and we lose the spirit, eh? I mean, we lose what you mention in the last paragraph of your book where you describe the moment when *talanoa* ends and something happens.<sup>8</sup> With the UN using *talanoa* as a process, we won't get that moment in the corrugated iron hut where what we call the *fū* [Tongan; clapping at a kava session] happens. *Talanoa*, for me, enables that moment.

(MT) This is exactly to the point because *talanoa* can open up, but it can be critical, too, and I appreciate your criticism. Surely the UN presses many things into a single mould. And I know that Ama'amalele Tofaeono criticized the Moana Declaration [a 2009 statement on climate change from Pacific Conference of Churches leaders] because of its anthropocentrism – as if the aim of all creation was simply to be good for humanity rather than the rest of the world.<sup>9</sup> So, one of the things I've enjoyed in reading theology is those critical moments of surprise – these fresh insights from theologians reading against the grain.

(JH) But it's not just that. This afternoon, the last paragraph in your book has been bothering me, in a good way. Because i have these three understandings of *talanoa* which you mentioned [story, telling, conversation], but i need to add what happens at the end of *talanoa*.

We have a joke in Tonga. Oh, let me try and put it a different way. A former student of mine at Sia'atoutai Theological College described how he drinks kava – he'll be very drunk, and then he'll go home and, like most people, try to get something to eat. So, he will get a piece of taro or cassava, or whatever. And he'll eat and then fall asleep. And then wake up in the morning and finish what was left in his mouth. I think this is what *talanoa* needs to get at. That morning. This is what I feel from your last paragraph. The circle has ended and the divine happens when the circle is disbanded. I need to add that element to my description of *talanoa*. That moment of effectiveness when you wake up the next morning and something clicks.

(MT) Is it fair to say that, just like the student is having his after-kava meal and the next morning he wakes up to finish it – the idea clicks – so, in a way, you're also carrying on the *talanoa* that your father began? I don't want to be presumptuous in telling you about your family, but readers will want to know that your father came up with the concept and term 'Coconut Theology' in order to begin developing a distinctly and consequentially Oceanian theology. And you're doing that now – you're doing what he was talking about in the sixties, seventies, and eighties. Are your *talanoas* partly with your father and the Coconut Theology he began? I don't mean this in a psychological sense. I mean it in a fathers-and-sons-talking-across-generations sense.

(JH) I haven't thought of it that way. Maybe that's what's happening. But it comes back to the question of *talanoa* being ongoing.

A lot of people have spoken of Coconut Theology as an indigenous or contextual theology or whatever. But i don't think that was what he meant. He

spoke of it as Coconut Theology, of course, but in his heart it was more of a practice. What was more important for him was that people can eat coconut if they don't have bread and say, 'This is the body of Christ'. That practical element was more important.

So in that sense, the answer to your question would be 'yes'. I'm continuing it, even though i think it's been unconscious. Going back to my work in prison – when i used to go, the only time i would serve communion was the week of Good Friday. And that's the only Christian ritual i would practise in prison. We would talk about the Bible, do Bible study, but on Good Friday, i would take a nice loaf of bread and serve communion, and then after that we'll serve it again, and we'll serve it again until the bread is done. Because i don't want to waste the bread. It's the practical element. It's feeding rather than theology that's more important to me. And i think that's the side of my father's theology that people don't pick up. It was about the practice. If you wake up in Funafuti and there's nothing, you can pick up a piece of tapioca and say, 'This is the body of Christ'. That's what he was pushing for.

(MT) Should *talanoa* ever be confrontational, or should *talanoa* always try to lead to more consensus?

(JH) Oh, i think *talanoa* should be confrontational. I mean, if it's not, then it's not worth having. Should it lead to consensus? I don't know how to answer that. Because sometimes after *talanoa* you have to be able to wake up and, like my former student said, have this nice mouthful to finish. And sometimes you can wake up and say, 'What the heck, why did i have this in my mouth?' So it should irritate as well, and not just get to consensus.

(MT) So, productive irritation?

(JH) That sounds good. [*Laughs.*] What do you think?

(MT) In much Pacific Islands literature, and things like the UN forums, *talanoa* gets presented as a gentle, consensus-oriented thing. But of course, real talk around the kava bowl can be a bit more energetic. I think there can be an edge to *talanoa*. But usually people want it to get us to some place better. It's not fighting for the sake of fighting.

(JH) Yeah. I can think of many instances where there will be one person who will say something, and the second person will start by saying, 'Oh yeah, I agree with you'. And then he will give a different thing, something that goes against the first person. And my job in those kinds of situations is to say, 'Oh, you guys are not agreeing. Come on, let's, let's have a really good fight!' [*Laughs.*] But this is a *talanoa* approach. Someone will say, 'Oh yeah, I like what you're saying. But this is what I think', and what they put into it is very confrontational. So, confrontation can be part of it, not only consensus.

(MT) I want to ask one more question. I'm reading you as an anthropologist. You're working actively as a public and contextual and practical theologian. Is there anything you would like to say, something I haven't brought up that you think we should have as part of our *talanoa*?

(JH) There are many things that you haven't brought up. I'm not sure if they are worth talking about. [*Laughs.*] The thing i'm currently struggling with is – let me step back. One of the books i've worked on that came out this year is *Theological and hermeneutical explorations from Australia: horizons of contextuality*.<sup>10</sup> When we started the project, i wanted us to critically rethink how to do contextual theology. But it didn't go that way, and i want to revisit this question and redo this project. What is contextual? One of the things we need to do is redefine what is context.

I've got two other projects coming out this year. One is on media as context.<sup>11</sup> And the other is on COVID-19 and doing theology in the 'new normal'.<sup>12</sup> But what is context in the pandemic? It's not really context in the geographical sense. It's not ideological. It's not even political. But we need to do theology in the context of COVID-19 while realizing the complexity of this thing called context and the natures of context.

### **The practice of engagement: research and teaching as conversations with an other's tradition**

In early 2021, Talal Al-Azem, a specialist in Islamic studies and history, and Johan Rasanayagam, an anthropologist whose research focuses on Islam, had a series of conversations online. Talal has for some time been drawing on anthropology to inform his teaching and research in Islamic theology and Muslim societies of the past, and Johan has been developing an anthropological engagement with Islamic traditions of thought that shifts the focus from representing Islam and Muslims to thinking about human being in conversation with those traditions. Our conversations started with our research, and how our thinking has been shaped through our readings of each other's disciplines. We soon turned to our teaching, and how our own engagement with the other's disciplinary tradition has informed our teaching, or prompted us to reflect on our relationship with our students. The dialogue presented below is an edited version of those online conversations.

#### *Contributors*

Talal Al-Azem (TA)

Johan Rasanayagam (JR)

#### *Conversation*

(JR) An engagement with difference or alterity is central to anthropology as a mode of knowing. In an engagement with others, we de-centre our own perspectives and imagine other possibilities of thinking and being. But I've come to realize that while, as a discipline, we have embraced this in our research, many of us, or I at least, have failed to do the same in our teaching. Some years ago, I received criticism in the feedback forms from students on a course on the anthropology of religion I used to teach. One student wrote:

I think the lecturer should be more careful about presenting the topics as theories because as a Christian I found some of what he said offensive when presented as fact. I also did not like having to defend theories I did not agree with in tutorial.



On the same form, another student wrote:

The lecturer stated that, 'and of course God does not exist', found this shocking that he said this to a room full of students, and offensive that he should put his opinion on us.

My response at the time was that this was a misunderstanding. The course was designed to examine how religion is produced as an analytic object within contrasting theoretical frames, as a Durkheimian social phenomenon, as a Geertzian cultural symbolic system of meaning, through a Marxist approach, and with Bourdieu's concept of habitus. I had, in fact, stated in different lectures words to the effect that 'gods don't exist', and also that spirits, or witches, aren't real. However, when I did so I was quoting Durkheim, the structural functionalist John Middleton, or other anthropologists whose analyses I was presenting. It crossed my mind that this was a misunderstanding by students who heard the quote, but not the fact that it *was* a quote. They may also, I thought, have been failing to distinguish their own personal beliefs from an examination, detached from subjective positions, of how theoretical frames provide distinctive perspectives on social phenomena. I addressed the problem in future iterations of the course by stating clearly at the outset that I was not giving my own personal opinions about the existence or otherwise of God or spirit beings, but was providing a discussion of contrasting conceptual perspectives on religion so that students could develop a faculty for critical thinking.

Reflecting back on the response of those students, and on my own, I think that there was something deeper going on. Even if students were fully aware that I was seeking to instil a critical, comparative approach to religion as a social or cultural phenomenon, the teaching itself produced a normatively secular space. By this I mean that a 'we' was assumed, comprising of lecturer, student, and the discipline of anthropology as a whole. 'We' were implicitly placed outside and above 'them', the subject matter of the course, so that we could perform a work of analysis. This was not a claim to objectivity as such. One of the aims of the course was to suggest that theory produces the object of its attention rather than neutrally describing a reality existing independent of any observer. A Durkheimian analysis produces, rather than simply describes, the object of society as a social fact, and religion as a manifestation of society. A Geertzian culturalist approach produces the object of religion as a symbolic system of meaning. Rather, secularity establishes a space in which objects of research are laid out in panoramic view before the analyst who stands outside and above them, in a position to comprehend those 'worlds', 'cultures', and 'social constructions' in comparative perspective, and to classify and manipulate them in pursuit of theoretical insights. Oppositions are set up, implicit and unacknowledged in the case of my own teaching on that course, between the reflective, critical production of knowledge and the unreflective living out of culture. Students in the course who may have been Christian, Muslim, or who identified themselves with other religious traditions could well have found themselves as the culturalized, objectified 'other' that the course produced, albeit unintentionally. It is no wonder that some felt alienated.

In our professional practice of research, as opposed to teaching, this problem has been recognized by anthropologists as one of representation. Lila Abu-Lughod, for example, has expressed an experience that I think is somewhat similar to that of the students on my course. She writes that her subject position of

a feminist and 'halfie', someone whose 'national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage', makes it impossible to maintain the boundary between the anthropologist 'we' and an objectified, culturalized 'other'.<sup>13</sup> Just as my students were, the halfie anthropologist is made uncomfortable by also occupying the space of the 'other' they are expected to produce through the work of analysis.

- (TA) I would like to pick up on the first notion raised by you, Johan: namely, that of 'engagement' with an other's tradition. You have already addressed some of the difficult questions of objectification and representation – of the 'we' and 'them' – that can arise in research as well as in the classroom. But there is, I think, another approach that might be helpful here: that in which another tradition serves not as object but as interlocutor.

As regards Islam and Muslims, the fields of anthropology, theology, area studies, Orientalism, and Islamic studies have each had various hues of engagement over their chequered histories. The idea of entering into a conversation – a meaningful dialogue that not only attempts to disclose the other, but also highlights one's own self and concepts – is a movement currently led most obviously by a number of anthropologists, and in a different fashion by a few theologians, who study and teach Islam and Muslims. As you have highlighted, the central problem with how Islam is approached in all of these disciplines is with their construal of Islam as an object. In all of the dominant paradigms of the past century, the anthropologist – but also the theologian or Islamicist – must decide what is within 'the object' of Islam. In order to be able to speak about it at all, the question of how one defines Islam – what its essential and unique qualities are – remains a matter of contention, as evidenced in Islamic studies by the publication of the late Shahab Ahmed's *What is Islam?*<sup>14</sup>

In order to move beyond some of these impasses, a dialogical engagement with 'the other' needs also to be supported by an engagement across academic traditions. From a theological perspective, I submit that there are some 'essential' qualities of Islam that should not prove controversial, and can serve as starting points in first outlining, then engaging with, different traditions' 'anthropologies'. The first is that Islam is a religious tradition premised upon a realist ontology. It takes the existence of the divine as a starting point: 'There is no divine being save God' being the first part of the Muslim testimony of faith. The second and more pertinent part to our present discussion is that the Qur'an posits an understanding of the human being, and thus of the human psyche, premised upon this ontology. This vision of the human self is fundamentally transformationalist. And it is the normative 'way of the Prophet' (the *sunna*) – affirmed in the second part of the Muslim testimony of faith, 'Muhammad is the Messenger of God' – that is meant to operationalize this transformationalist psychology in history.

These two credal points form the basis of a third understanding as to an essential Qur'anic notion of human society. Toshiko Izutsu, in *God and man in the Qur'an*,<sup>15</sup> argues that what made Islam such a radical break from and threat to Arabian society of Muhammad's time was the way in which the Qur'an valued the individual. Whereas in pre-Islamic Arabian society the value was predicated upon the existence, strength, or weakness of the tribe, the Qur'an connected the

individual as individual both to a spiritual prehistory and to an eschatological post-history. That is to say, the individual had a metaphysical and moral value in and of himself or herself, regardless of tribal affiliation. In all their variations, the historical Islamicate societies that followed shared in these basic understandings of ontology and what it meant to be human, individually and in society. I would argue that the various and varied institutions of these societies also assumed this metaphysic and psychology.

Much of what I have outlined above are the fruits of philological and historical approaches to the ideas and concepts of Islamicate societies. But where these disciplinary approaches end is where the opportunities provided by theology and the social sciences, especially when in dialogue, begin. For what the latter can do is to help us better understand not just the structures of Muslim societies past and present, or the motivations, thoughts, and behaviour of Muslims as individuals in these societies. Rather, when put into conversation with the Islamic tradition, anthropology especially can provide an avenue to moving beyond impasses we face in our own endeavours; not by assimilating 'their' world to our own concepts, but by allowing their concepts – rooted in their ontology, their vision of man, and their historical conscience – to emerge as points of engagement and self-critique.

(JR) Recently, within our discipline there have been calls for a 'post-secular' anthropology that takes the form of an engagement with theology of the sort you have just outlined. For example, Joel Robbins has described anthropology's past engagement with Christian theology as an 'awkward relationship'.<sup>16</sup> He argues that anthropologists, for the most part, either have critically interrogated the implicit Christian roots of the discipline, or have treated theology as data that informed them about the culture or worldview of the people they studied. Instead, he invites anthropologists to take seriously theology's intellectual positions and not just appropriate it as ethnography. Another proponent of this move, Joel Kahn, has posed the question as how someone, in his own case a person whose selfhood is rooted in what he calls 'scientific naturalism', can establish open and productive encounters with others whose 'horizons of belief', or 'ontological construals', differ radically from their own.<sup>17</sup> A common stance of an anthropologist encountering beliefs or ontologies not grounded in an immanent, disenchanted world is, he observes, a suspension of disbelief, a bracketing off of those beliefs so as to remain open to other modes of being and perceiving. However, this bracketing off is a problem for Kahn. It confines those differing construals to their own space, which is in the end the secular space of private beliefs and morality, placed outside a space of public interaction from which non-secular reasoning is excluded. This suspension of disbelief is what I expected of the students on my course, which enabled us to think about and represent 'their' cultural worlds, 'their' ontologies. The alternative that Kahn proposes is a space of conversation and dialogue, an active and mutually transformative engagement rather than a bracketing off. While secular and religious reasonings differ, dialogue can, he hopes, shift the horizons of both parties.

Along similar lines, Philip Fountain has advocated an anthropology *with* theology rather than *about* theology.<sup>18</sup> He argues that a post-secular anthropology should start from a reflection on the profoundly secular modes of knowledge production in the discipline. As the experience of my own students attests, this

excludes those who hold religious commitments, and forces them to occupy a stance of ‘methodological agnosticism’ that establishes atheism as the neutral, objective position. Rather than bracket off any personal commitments in order to engage in the work of analysis, for Fountain an anthropology *with* theology would entail what he calls a radical embrace of theology, an ‘anthro-theology’. This is an engaged anthropology that does not simply observe and describe, but reimagines and promotes forms of human flourishing and hopeful futures, a project that Fountain identifies as being progressed through theological thinking. Anthropology cannot keep theology at arm’s length, he argues, maintaining the superiority of a universalist secular thought, but needs to recognize and engage with a plurality of construals.

- (TA) A number of recent works have, I believe, demonstrated the possibility of such an approach. Brinkley Messick’s most recent work, *Shari’a scripts: a historical anthropology*,<sup>19</sup> is a powerful example of how the study of Muslims’ legal ideas embedded in texts, and the ethnographic study of practitioners of those legal traditions, can be bridged. The result is not objectification, but a study that makes the ways of knowing and arguing practised by his Yemeni subjects intelligible and intelligent. Similar attempts at deploying the ethnographical to understand theologically engaged rationalities can be witnessed in the works of Stefania Pandolfo’s *Knot of the soul*, Ellen Amster’s *Medicine and the saints*, Hussein Agrama’s *Questioning secularism*, and your own *Islam in post-Soviet Uzbekistan: the morality of experience*.<sup>20</sup> None of these works reduce individual Muslims’ experiences to tropes of piety, nor do they flatten the human beings studied or their worlds. Rather, what unites them is their examination of the changes in various Muslim societies’ concepts and practices when impacted by new bureaucratic, medical, or political rationalities in the twentieth and early twenty-first century. What it means for a Muslim to reason morally, to pursue psychological or physical ‘health’, or to seek just governance in relation to Qur’anic notions or Islamic practices is made meaningful. And, for those willing, they allow engagement with those rationalities insofar as they are taken as alternative yet meaningful ways of being human.

The value of such an approach has already borne fruit in my teaching theology and religion. In my own tutorials, I have assigned some of the above works alongside others in the history of the concepts, practices, and institutions of Islamic law and moral theology, such as Wael Hallaq’s *Shari’a or The impossible state*, for example.<sup>21</sup> Armed now with the tools of history, theology, and anthropology, students have been able to make meaningful connections between ideas and how these ideas were embodied (or not) in people and in their societies – connections that have surprised and delighted the students, whatever their theological stance. That is to say, understanding what it meant to be a Muslim in everyday life became a tangible possibility. Previously, even Islamic history textbooks promising insight into what it had meant to live as a Muslim often delivered nothing more than the same lists of dogma and ritual that philology and Islamic studies had long ago produced. Now, an anthropologically rooted engagement with Islamic history and studies has brought both to life much more vividly for my students of theology and religion. But this was only possible because the approaches did not abandon philosophy and theology for

mere ethnography; they creatively fused them together, such that the sum was greater than the parts. A more nuanced appreciation of how various Islamicate philosophies and ideas were actually *lived* – the nature of their perception, their morality perceptions, their understanding of selfhood – was all now beginning to be possible. Likewise, when moving into the early modern period, how the rise of new notions of the nation-state, of governmentality, of law, or of medicine, for example, impacted Muslims from North Africa to Southeast Asia, and how this transformed many of their traditional Islamic concepts, allowed the students a greater appreciation of the questions of modernism, of colonialism, and of the rise of nation-states in the Muslim world. And this was achieved without reductively essentializing these Muslims' experiences to mere dogma, while also not dismissing or downplaying their engagements with the Islamic tradition.

(JRP) What is at stake in a dialogue between anthropology and theology, I think, is how to engage with difference. This is brought out clearly in the call in 2008 by the then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams for sharia jurisprudence to be recognized in some way within the statutory law of the UK, an intervention that attracted a lot of media attention at the time.<sup>22</sup> He called for the recognition within the state legal process of a more developed version of the existing Sharia Councils. These would act as a recognized authority for Muslims, arbitrating on what are serious matters of faith and what is merely cultural practice. His public intervention is an example, in fact, of the engaged, theologically grounded reimagining of public ethics and politics that Fountain calls on anthropology to embrace. What is at stake, for Williams, is the recognition of difference in plural societies that encompass communities constituted by multiple religious, ethnic, or cultural affiliations. Where citizenship is not bound by one level of belonging, but involves multiple affiliations, he argues, a universalist enlightenment vision that places everyone on exactly equal terms before the uniform law of the sovereign state is incoherent. It ghettoizes all rationalities that are outside itself. In his vision, the 'rule of law' is shifted from the enforcement of a universal, unitary sovereignty to a defence of human dignity.

However, Williams's location of difference at the level of collectivities poses a problem. It seems in danger of essentializing Islam, or an Islamic ethics, as that which happens to be expressed and exercised through the operation of state-recognized Sharia Councils. One of the most significant contributions of anthropology in its engagement with Islam, perhaps the most significant, is a recognition of the plurality of interpretation and practice of Muslims themselves, something you have alluded to earlier when you talked about including anthropological work in your teaching of Islamic theology and history. Talal Asad's influential call to approach Islam as a discursive tradition has inspired a wide-ranging anthropological investigation into how Muslims, across geographical space and political situation, engage in debates and struggles to define Islam and what it is to be a Muslim.<sup>23</sup> If nothing else, this engagement with Islam as it is lived out by Muslims in diverse settings underlines that any ruling by a state-recognized Sharia Council would be just one contingent, located interpretation, open to challenge and alternative readings. Being grounded in the sacred texts, it would be part of what Asad has called an Islamic tradition, but any authority it possessed in the sense of claims to represent a Muslim community,

or providing a definitive ruling, would be derived from the secular state, and not from any notion of an Islamically defined collectivity.

Difference cannot be recognized and engaged through notions of community, group, or collectivity. The experience of those students on my course on religion points to how social or cultural units are 'our' conceptual productions, the state's or the anthropologist's. Instead, we need to recognize and respond to difference through the relations we form with individual persons. This was brought home to me forcefully over the past summer, once more by students on our programme, while we were locked down because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and many of us were still in shock over the public murder of George Floyd by law enforcement officers in the US. The leader of the university's BAME student group contacted the Head of Department for Anthropology. She had been approached by almost every black student on our programme to complain about repeated experiences of racism in our classes. Many of them had shared with her their desire to drop the subject. This took me and my colleagues by surprise. In the past, some of us have had informal discussions about why black students on our programme seemed to experience disproportionately more difficulties. Could this be because of social isolation? There are far fewer black students studying social sciences at Aberdeen than at many other universities in the UK. Could it be made worse by an over-stretched student support infrastructure? It never occurred to any of us that we ourselves, and our teaching, could be part of the problem. Not anthropology, that most reflective, self-critical of disciplines, that has at its reason for being a relation with difference.

I and my colleagues responded with shock and discomfort that for some, myself included, turned to a defensive anger that our programme and our teaching was being misrepresented and caricatured by the BAME student group leader, who herself was not an anthropology student. However, as I engaged personally with one of our own students, my eyes were opened to her experience in our classes that I should have known all along, but had been blind to. What struck me particularly was that the student felt that it was not so much the content of the teaching that was the problem, though that too, sometimes. It was more that she felt silenced by the modes of knowing and argument that underlay our teaching. This forced me to re-evaluate my own teaching, and to think again about the course feedback I had received all those years ago.

The problem, I have come to see, is not that I have been unaware of the critiques of objectivity, representation, of secularism, of the category of religion itself that produces oppositions between natural and supernatural, knowledge and belief. I have included discussions of this in my courses and developed my research around an exploration of these concepts. The problem was that I constructed separate spaces for research and for teaching. Many colleagues would likely question a clear distinction between teaching and research; one is implicated in the other. I understand this to mean that the content of our teaching is informed by our research. In addition, we do not simply fill our students' minds with knowledge, but prepare them to ask questions, critically to interrogate the world around them. But there is a distinction between research and teaching that has remained unaddressed, at least by myself. That is the *relation* we establish with an *other*. For me at least, that relation has been different when I am conducting 'research' from when I am 'teaching'.

In my research, I have been attempting to build upon discussions going on in our discipline to suggest an engagement with an Islamic tradition that does not produce Islam as our object. This engagement would not be a work of analysis, which seeks to categorize and define, to identify constituent parts to better comprehend their workings. It is more along the lines of the conversation that the proponents of a post-secular anthropology have proposed, which is open to a shifting of construals. The point here is not so much, as Robbins has suggested, that Islamic theology gets things ‘right’ that I, a ‘scientific naturalist’, get wrong. The conversation is rather an engagement with difference that calls my own self, my concepts, into question. An Islamic tradition is for me an interlocutor that prompts critique, in an anthropology that is an ethical mode of knowing. That kind of conversation might elicit not just embarrassment and discomfort, but also defensiveness and anger. This is what, perhaps, is necessary to provoke questions about the grounds on which a person stands. I have frequently been made uncomfortable in my research, working in Uzbekistan and Morocco. Physical discomfort, vulnerability, sometimes anger and anxiety are common features of that experience. They are also what have taken me outside myself. However, I have very rarely felt those states when teaching, perhaps because I have maintained teaching as a secular space that excludes other modes of reasoning.

(TA) The approach outlined by you – of approaching Muslims as an engagement with lived philosophy – can indeed open up new vistas for those researching or teaching in Islamic studies and theology. For there to be any possibility of true discovery or pedagogy in the academic setting, one must be able to communicate in a ‘reasonable’ way without expecting the subjects or students to occupy one’s own perspective, be it scientific or theistic (or of one or another confessional stance *within* a tradition). In Islamic historiographical terms, this approximates what Marshall Hodgson referred to as the ‘Islamicate’: those broad social and cultural patterns experienced by Muslims and non-Muslims who were together informed by Islam’s metaphysical and moral vision. Hodgson cautioned that this was not intended to sever religion from life, for to do so ‘is partly to falsify it.’<sup>24</sup> Rather, it was exactly to allow for the possibility that the ideas of a Farabi or a Dara Shikoh might be contested as to their rootedness in the ontology or confessional boundaries of the Qur’an respectively, whilst still being recognizable ways of speaking within a cultural and societal milieu underwritten by Islam. This, in turn, is not dissimilar to MacIntyre’s notion of ‘tradition’, which has been drawn upon by Talal Asad in dealing with Islam as a discursive tradition.<sup>25</sup> This discursiveness of course need not be limited to texts; what is perhaps more interesting, as we saw in some of the works cited above, was how these Islamicate ideas themselves can be deployed to understand human action, especially when the actors are Muslim.

Perhaps this is where, in return, Islamic studies and theology can also inform the development of anthropology of Islam and Muslims. To return to the earlier examples of Islam’s ontology and consequent psychology as non-deniable qualities of Islam as religious tradition, the study of Islam as theology and history can furnish the social scientist with enough definition of what Islam *is* without essentializing Muslims or placing the anthropologist in the



uncomfortable position of serving as confessional arbiter. That is, conceptual history and theology together can provide the anthropologist with the substance required to engage with Islam as philosophical interlocutor. This engagement can develop the critical faculty without reducing it to a form of analysis that flattens the world and people's experiences therein or reduces them to objects to be controlled or subjectivities to be reformed.

But one might go a step further. Taking Islam as a tradition with which to engage may even open up new ways of dealing with non-exclusivist claims to truth whilst avoiding the problems thrown up by relativist and multiculturalist approaches. Be it in premodern Islam's accommodation of legal and judicial pluralism, or in the Sufi dictum that 'the paths to God are as numerous as the breaths of creation', both Islamic theology and Islamicate culture theorized and practised a form of non-exclusivism that never veered into relativism that abandoned the commitment to Truth (itself one of the names of the divine). Recent work on the contemporary Moroccan philosopher Abderrahmane Taha, perhaps today's most famous Muslim philosopher addressing such questions, has sought to use this tradition as a springboard in developing ways out of the impasses created by positivistic and reductionist approaches to the self and mind, on the one hand, and the scientific flattening of the social world by the Enlightenment dichotomy of individual and society, on the other.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, within the broader Islamic tradition, the Muslim mystics of Sufism present alternative approaches to ways of knowing and being in the world. Whereas the late medieval scholastic *kalam* theologians often teetered on the precipice of an analytically induced nominalism, these tendencies were balanced – in the individual scholar and in the scholarly communities – by an unabashedly experiential, or *dhawqi*, approach to knowledge. That the cosmos was to be read as a sign, pointing beyond the multiplicity of the natural world to the One (*al-Ahad*, also a divine name), is explicit in the Qur'anic portrait of creation. The achievement of the Sufis was a lived philosophy in which the beauty of the divine was experienced in birdsong just as much as it was in prayer. The natural world becomes not only the testing ground of mankind but also the site of epiphany: the dimensions of being can be experienced not only – or even primarily – rationally, but through the body and ultimately the spirit. Thus, many of the arts of Islam, be they 'high' or 'popular', in the language of so many academic studies, all deploy the various faculties and senses as multiple ways of knowing, if fundamentally rooted in and returning to the One. In so doing, however, this direct experience of Being (the divine as *wajib al-wujud*) through phenomena never nullified the ethical imperative. If anything, the dominant argument of Sufis such as Junayd of Baghdad (d. c.910), the Andalusian Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), and the Persian poet-mystic Jami (d. 1492) was in the necessary complementarity and ultimate oneness of the ethical, the ontological, and the aesthetic.

### **Connecting with the human condition from the inside out and outside in: a dialogue between a social anthropologist and a Buddhist theologian**

Fo Guang Shan was founded in Taiwan in the 1960s by Master Hsing Yun, then a young itinerant monk. Today it comprises a monastic order with thousands of monks and nuns, and a parallel lay wing that claims several millions of members. It runs temples, libraries, art galleries, schools, nursing homes, orphanages, and a



number of university-level educational institutions, and is active on every inhabited continent. The organization promotes Master Hsing Yun's interpretation of a modernist form of Chinese Buddhism that emerged in the early twentieth century, known as 'Humanistic Buddhism' (人間佛教, *renjianfojiao*). Humanistic Buddhists emphasize the importance of applying Buddhist teachings in the present-day human world to alleviate suffering and realize Buddha nature here and now, rather than focusing on producing effects in future lives, as they believe traditional Chinese Buddhists tended to do.

Jonathan has been conducting research on Fo Guang Shan and its distinctive variety of Buddhism – what it calls Humanistic Buddhism – since 2009. That is how he came to meet Venerable Juewei in Taiwan in 2017. The dialogue below took place online in February 2021, while Venerable Juewei was in Wollongong and Jonathan was in Spain, and the transcript was later lightly edited for clarity.

### Contributors

Venerable Juewei (VJW)

Jonathan Mair (JM)

### Conversation

(JM) Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in this dialogue, Venerable Juewei. Perhaps we could begin by speaking a little about the relationship between anthropology and theology. You told me in earlier conversation that you think some aspects of the study of Buddhism can be integrated with the social sciences. Would you like to begin by elaborating on that idea?

(VJW) Yes, Jon, *Humanistic Buddhism*, in particular, may be classified with the human sciences because it shares the same subject. In the case of Humanistic Buddhism, it is a subject of service, and in the case of anthropology or any other human science, it is a subject of study. In that sense, both disciplines need to learn more about the human *being*. The natural sciences examine the physical aspects of the human person: its form and function. However, in Buddhism, we see the form as only one of five aggregates<sup>27</sup> or sources of experiences. And in the case of social or cultural anthropology, as I understand it, you are interested in relationships among people, how the culture is formed through relationships. That is important in Humanistic Buddhism too, because it is relating with the other that helps practitioners to grow as a bodhisattva or one who aspires to awaken for the sake of all living beings.<sup>28</sup>

What anthropology does, together with many of the other human sciences, is that it gives us a framework of analysis and of seeing how the Human operates in the world. For us as practitioners, we are insiders, analysing and making sense of our daily human experiences using the very frameworks that we advocate. You are looking for a Buddhist theologian for this dialogue. That is different from a Buddhist studies scholar. A Buddhist studies scholar looks at the discipline from the outside, whereas a Buddhist theologian looks at the discipline from the inside. So, I am an insider and an academic looking at Humanistic Buddhism – from both a critical academic perspective and a constructive developmental viewpoint.

- (JM) I haven't really heard the term 'theology' used much in the context of Buddhism; I think of it above all as a Christian category. Do you consider yourself to be a Buddhist theologian?
- (VJW) It's a growing field. I'm increasingly thinking of myself as a Buddhist theologian, although I will have to say that it is theology in its broadest definition.
- (JM) How would you explain the difference between being a Buddhist studies scholar and a Buddhist monastic who is a theologian?
- (VJW) A Buddhist studies scholar studies religious behaviour from outside the Buddhist tradition. For example, the scholar could investigate Buddhist sūtras without believing a word. But a Buddhist theologian accepts the truth of the teachings and studies it normatively. In addition, Professor John Makransky, a proponent for Buddhist Theology and Buddhist critical-constructive reflection, advocates for 'holes' left by findings from rigorous academic research to be further developed into something positive. For example, Professor Donald Lopez's critical research resulted in a refutation of a basic assumption of the renowned seventh-century Buddhist scholar Candrakīrti. While Candrakīrti assumed the possibility of replicating the Buddha's intention, Lopez proved otherwise. To Makransky, this left behind a dissatisfactory theological gap.<sup>29</sup>

Hence, I see the main difference between Buddhist studies scholarship and theology in their intentions. As a Buddhist theologian, I wish to study a Buddhist sage's teachings for Buddhism to remain relevant. Usually, the Master wants the Dharma to guide people in their thoughts, speech, and actions so as to create a better future. The problem is that his or her followers, in implementing the teachings, might have encountered difficulties and challenges. When scholars analyse and critique without differentiating between the Dharma and its implementation, readers might lose faith. As a theologian, my response would be to construct positive paths forward given the lessons learned. In this way, I see the difference between the Buddhist theologian and the scholar lies in our intention.

- (JM) That's also related to a difference between Buddhist studies and the anthropology of Buddhism. The anthropology of Buddhism starts from ethnography and seeing what people are doing right now in communities – or at least that is what it should do, in my opinion. Whereas Buddhist studies always starts with the texts. This approach was famously criticized by Stanley Tambiah, an anthropologist of Buddhism. He called it the 'Pali Text Society mentality'.<sup>30</sup> It means you're only interested in getting back to the earliest version of the text, which you think is going to be the most authentic. If there's any deviation from that in the actual practice of Buddhism, then it must be a mistake, or it's inauthentic, it's inferior. So I think I can understand what you're saying in those terms. What it means to be a Buddhist theologian is that you are still grounded in those texts, but you have a different perspective. You're not starting from the point of view of trying to boil everything down to the authentic, original word, but the original 'intent', to use another of Master Hsing Yun's expressions.<sup>31</sup>

(VJW) The intent for a Buddhist theologian is the pursuit of the truth for the purpose of living an awakened life. The text is important but the context is crucial. There were conditions that made those texts what they were. Not all of those conditions still apply today. And that is why Buddhism is a lived religion, or a *living* religion.

The Buddhist theologian has a faith, but it is not always a faith in something external. Venerable Master Hsing Yun, my teacher and founder of Fo Guang Shan, says that there are different levels of faith. There's one level of faith whereby there's a Buddha and a bodhisattva to whom we can pray for a good life, such as prosperity or good health. At another level of faith, adherents wish to learn from the Buddha by reading texts and following the Buddha's teachings and actions. At still another level of faith, there is a belief in the intrinsic Buddha nature in all sentient beings.

Another important difference between the insider view of Buddhist theologians and outsider views is in relation to the element of practice. I believe that Venerable Master Hsing Yun is humanizing Buddhism and humanizing people. That, I believe, is the difference between anthropologists and Buddhist theologians. As a Humanistic Buddhist theologian, I study the religion to determine what it means to be human. The intent of a practising theologian is to build a better human world. Whereas I believe for the anthropologist, that goal is not so obvious.

I believe that most philosophies in the sciences are all in pursuit of the truth. So is Buddhism. But bodhisattvas, known for their compassion, also value their service to humanity. And it is a part of the bodhisattva path to pursue the truth for the sake of all beings as opposed to a solitary meditator who seeks enlightenment through his or her own meditation. There are many ways to pursue the truth: through research, debates, inquiries, and philosophical studies, just to name a few. Humanistic Buddhists seek an understanding of how things really are by examining the human experience: what it is to be human, how we relate to one another, and how we build a better world together.

(JM) I think a lot of anthropologists also hope to serve humanity, but usually in quite an abstract way. The reason many anthropologists are attracted to the discipline is that they hope they might be able to promote peace and justice by helping different groups of people understand each other, and especially by giving voice to communities whose voices are seldom heard. One of the things anthropologists emphasize when teaching students is that all communities have value – that local practices, which can seem illogical or immoral to outsiders, usually make good sense once we know the context of practices and relations. This approach goes back to the founders of the discipline, writers such as Malinowski, who pioneered participant observation, for example, or to Durkheim, who famously insisted that, from an ethnographic point of view, there are no false religions.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps in this sense anthropologists *are* a little like theologians, trying to see things from the inside. Perhaps their faith in humans has something in common with Buddhist ideas about Buddha nature, too.

But there is an important difference. At the same time as trying to understand people charitably, from their own point of view, anthropologists also often seem to feel that a real understanding of human life and relationships is a matter of

seeing through or beyond what people tell us to an underlying reality of power, greed, and exploitation. This approach is common in various social science disciplines and is based on a real cynicism about human nature and motives. It became popular under the influence of Marxist and poststructuralist theories in the 1970s and 1980s. Of course, greed and exploitation exist everywhere, but, as Joel Robbins argued some years ago, the urge to uncover them can lead anthropologists to ignore the ways in which people aspire to be good.<sup>33</sup>

So anthropologists in general tend to be quite conflicted in their approach: sometimes they try to find the good and the reasonable in what people do, like theologians, but sometimes they are rather cynical about life and seek out suffering and exploitation.

I'm sure that in fact both of these approaches are important. I don't think either is wrong, but I do think in general we suffer from a lack of nuance in applying them. Our frames of analysis, going all the way back to those early founders, prime us to see things exclusively in one mode or another, either as moral, transcendent, and religious, or as self-interested and mutually exploitative. I think your tradition provides a much more nuanced understanding of these questions. Together with James Laidlaw, I've argued that this is an area in which social anthropology could really learn something from the kind of Humanistic Buddhism you practise and study as a Fo Guang Shan monastic and theologian.<sup>34</sup>

(VJW) Buddhist theologians are aware that there is Mara. We do not naïvely claim that everybody is good. That we are aware of Mara does not negate the goodness in people. The tension between good and evil exists in us. A Buddhist theologian attempts to highlight goodness in people by exploring modern academic studies in philosophy, ethics, religious studies, sociology, etc., to address problems and needs in society today.

Through the 35Nan Tien Institute, I run a Communities of Practice and a Turning Points Stories Facebook page for this reason. Since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, we have offered a weekly thirty-minute Sunday check-in session<sup>35</sup> for individuals from around the world to cultivate the habit of pausing and checking in with one another based on humanistic values. The Turning Points Stories<sup>36</sup> is a collection of real-life episodes of people encountering difficult situations with positive thoughts, speech, and actions.

(JM) One of the questions that the Editors of the *JRAI* have asked us to discuss relates to the issue of truth and it reflects a certain tension in the study of Christianity. Many practising Christians have an account of their lives in which Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and other supernatural forces are present and are important actors. What does an anthropologist who doesn't believe in these actors make of that? Do they just produce a description that excludes Jesus as an actor? Or do they write as if they did believe? Isn't that in bad faith? I wonder if you feel that the same tension arises in relation to the study of Buddhism?

(VJW) As an academic, I teach many students who study Humanistic Buddhism who are not Buddhists. They may be Hindus, Christians, Catholics, or atheists, but they come because they have an affinity with humanistic values. They explore Buddhism for the purpose of personal or professional development. I am quite

sure that students must have encountered tensions which are usually revealed during class discussions and reflective journaling.

One Buddhist student said that he experienced a crisis on his first day of class. What he learned when he was younger as true was overturned by scholarly research. With these legends recognized as nothing more than legends, it took him several modules to understand the value of context and become a more grounded Buddhist. This tension became a precious part of the learning process that led to an 'a-ha!' moment. The Buddhist theologian or student has discovered something new and that insight may be very different from his or her prior knowledge.

- (JM) In a way, that's a very anthropological process. You know, the idea of fieldwork has often been for people to immerse themselves in an unfamiliar environment where they're bound to get things wrong, to make mistakes, to do things which are unintentionally even offensive to the people around them! And then, you know, by doing that, and by being uncomfortable in their skin, in an unfamiliar situation, they learn about things which they wouldn't have noticed and which the local people wouldn't have thought to tell them.
- (VJW) Yes, Buddhists call this the First Noble Truth, which says that 'there is suffering or dis-ease'. It is a recognition that the existing paradigm has to shift because it contains errors and non-clarity, which results in discomfort and dissatisfaction. This recognition is the start of an investigation and resolution.
- (JM) I think in my experience in terms of somebody who started studying Buddhism not as a Buddhist was really that the distinction in my mind between being a believer and not being a believer was broken down through my experience of Buddhism. I first started doing research on Buddhism in the north of China in Inner Mongolia. I spent a lot of time in a temple. When people came into the temple precincts, the first thing they would do would be to greet the Buddha by making a small offering of incense or money and either prostrating themselves on the floor or making very deep bows. The lamas and other people I met there encouraged me to do the same.

The culture that I grew up in, in the UK, had given me two assumptions that proved to be very unhelpful in this situation – I should have known better, as an anthropologist, but they were deeply ingrained. The first was that ritualized actions are supposed to be expressions of some specific, sincere belief. The second was that performing such rituals without the appropriate beliefs was not just hypocritical, but deeply insulting and disrespectful. I still feel terrible to this day about the time when, as an atheist teenager, I finished a Christmas Eve night out with friends by going to midnight mass and ended up taking communion! I didn't want to offend by refusing, but I knew I was breaking the rules.

In the temple in Inner Mongolia, I didn't want to make the same mistake. At the beginning, when people encouraged me to make prostrations, I would scrupulously interrupt and explain to them the things about Buddhism that I didn't believe. For example, I might say, 'I think Buddhism is great, but I find the theory of reincarnation hard to accept'. I was trying to be respectful but it's a very strange response, right? And they were not interested at all. The more

I've studied Buddhism in different places, the more I realized that ordinary people have a wide variety of understandings of what they're doing. In most communities, there's little pressure for people to decide 'Am I 100 per cent a believer or 100 per cent not a believer', but instead a focus on the idea that Buddhism is like a tool kit that supplies ideas and practices that can help you and others to lead a good life. Often sincerity is valued, but as an outcome of practice, not a condition of it. Do you think that's accurate?

- (VJW) Yes, I think that applies in many cases. For example, I have a sociologist friend, an adviser to the Humanistic Buddhism Centre, who is not a Buddhist. But he is so taken in by the Centre's exploration of humanistic values for a better world. This shows that people find what coheres with them from a multifaceted Buddhism. They say Buddhism has many gates. Ritual is only one such gate. My sociologist friend loves our humanistic values, and now he advocates for Humanistic Buddhism and the humanistic values, when he's not a Buddhist. He got to know us by looking at what we do, and probably felt comfortable with our authenticity. But of course, we never asked him to prostrate before a Buddha or perform any of the rituals. He just comes to eat all the good food we have on offer. However, I must add that we light candles for him and his ill friends in times of need!

That is Humanistic Buddhism. Humanistic Buddhism is about *upāya* or the adaptation of the Buddha's teachings to the level of his audience's understanding.<sup>37</sup> In the case of Humanistic Buddhism, *upāya* becomes skilful means for contemporary times. For example, I work in an institution of higher education. There are other monastics who work for the newspapers, other forms of media, art, or in one of Fo Guang Shan's 400 non-profit enterprises. In our workplace, monastics invite those with affinity in those areas to learn more about Humanistic Buddhism, not necessarily for conversion, but for understanding and to build a better world together.

If you study Humanistic Buddhism as an anthropologist, your unfamiliarity can become an advantage: seeing everything with fresh eyes. As an insider, I know the pattern and have additional insider information of why things are as they are. As a result of that, sometimes I think Buddhist theologians end up in a more conflicted position. Academia aims to work things out into a model or framework. Life does not work like that. As an insider, I find out more about these conflicts and can use Buddhist teachings to resolve these paradoxes. For example, Buddhism teaches me that complementary positions are natural. The Buddha or the Venerable Master may say one thing under a set of conditions and offer a completely different teaching under other conditions. But in academia, that is not permissible because truth is evidence-based and not transcendental.

- (JM) That makes me think of another area in which anthropology and Humanistic Buddhism have something in common: the importance they place on understanding the variety of human cultures and, in particular, the ethical significance of cultural variety. Again, I think this is an area in which anthropologists sometimes get themselves into a muddle and in which we might learn something useful from Buddhists.

As we were discussing, anthropologists have often felt that it's their responsibility to improve intercultural understanding by explaining why each culture makes sense in its own terms. That's a fine tradition, but, on its own, it tends to lead to moral relativism – the Board of the American Anthropological Association actually campaigned against the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights for this reason.<sup>38</sup> From my point of view, moral relativism is not a satisfying position for an ethnographer. First, because as philosophers have long argued, as an affirmative ethical position, relativism is self-defeating.<sup>39</sup> Second, because it leads anthropologists to treat people as if they were locked in cultural silos when we know that people routinely inhabit multiple cultural worlds and are able to think and speak ethically across borders of cultural difference.<sup>40</sup> And finally, I just don't believe that the moral relativism that many anthropologists defend in print really reflects their own engagement with cultural difference in their fieldwork and in their personal lives. Yet there are hardly any anthropologists who try to understand what it would mean to have an ethical conversation in the context of significant cultural difference. Nigel Rapport is one interesting exception.<sup>41</sup>

I think Humanistic Buddhism approaches similar questions in a more successful way. As I understand it, the idea is that wherever you are, you have to try to be a cultured person in your community with the connections, the relationships that you happen to have, the traditions that you happen to have, the opportunities and challenges you live with – the ones which just happen to be available to you. So the concrete forms of a good life are always relative to culture and society to a significant degree. But that doesn't mean that good and bad, right and wrong, is arbitrary. There is some kind of universal human reason based on compassion and logic. Even if we have to do things in very different ways to be a good person in our respective settings, we can still have a meaningful conversation about what is better and what is worse and what is desirable and what we should avoid. We can even educate or learn from each other – that would be an uncomfortable idea for many anthropologists, I think, but I see it as essential.

(VJW) That is our Middle Way, which comes from a deep understanding of emptiness and the absence of absolutes. Everything may be conditional, but there's one major condition relevant to both our disciplines: the fact that we are humans. As a result, mutual respect must exist. This respect provides a strong and sound framework from which we can operate.

COVID has galvanized people around the world in ways previously unimaginable. We recognize that many 'tribes' are truly in it together, suffering similar traumas and even the same feelings of injustice as the poverty gap widens. The experience of suffering is felt worldwide. It saddens me to hear the big COVID casualty numbers in the UK and Spain. Even though here in Australia and New Zealand, we seem to be pretty good in terms of our COVID management, it does not stop us from feeling sad for whatever that is happening in Europe and America. Many of our friends, volunteers, and devotees who have relatives staying in other countries are not immune to COVID, as it is with residents in the safer countries.



In this way we become more connected, and that is our Buddha nature. We are all connected by our intrinsic fountain of goodness. Peter Wohlleben, a German forester, stunned the world when he published about how trees feel and communicate in *The hidden life of trees*.<sup>42</sup> So are we all, above ground, communicating. Both Humanistic Buddhism and anthropology, I hope, are developing ways for us to communicate better.

### Christianity as common critique

Over the course of several weeks in early 2021, Prof. Elias Bongmba, a theologian, and Dr Naomi Haynes, an anthropologist, shared a set of emailed exchanges exploring the overlaps between their disciplines. Their discussion crystallized around their shared observations of African Christianity, and especially the expansion of Pentecostalism across the continent. It was also animated by their shared Christian faith. As members of different Protestant traditions who have watched the growth of Pentecostalism as outsiders, they found common ground in both praise and critique of this sister tradition. Their dialogue also explored the possible grounds of praise and critique in anthropology and theology, and the problems that arise for scholars in each discipline when such responses are voiced, or left unsaid.

#### Contributors

Elias Kifon Bongmba (EKB)

Naomi Haynes (NH)

#### Conversation

(EKB) I think the question of faith relates to both disciplines in different ways. First, anthropologists study people who declare faith in a divine being and the teachings and practices of their communities. Anthropologists do not usually engage in their task as religious practitioners, but rather use social scientific methods to understand that faith as best as they can. They can report what members of faith communities tell them about what they do and/or why they do certain things, but they do not invest in the interpretation of beliefs or prescribe what members of the faith community should do. Theologians, on the other hand, study the large body of teachings of the faith community, sacred texts, statements of belief, and so forth. These sources provide materials for critical interpretation, analysis, and construction of new ideas to reflect the teachings of sacred texts and past theological texts. This is done in response to the challenges faced by both the faith community and society at large, and innovative fields such as black theology, liberation theology, and feminist theology all grew up in response to such challenges.

Despite these disciplinary differences, I think that there is a lot that anthropologists and theologians can learn from one another. Anthropologists of Christianity certainly cannot ignore theological developments, because these have shaped the growth of the faith communities they study. For example, African Independent Churches (AICs), an important subject of anthropological research, grew out of local critiques of church teaching. Interestingly, it was researchers with theological sensitivities who first noticed what was happening with AICs (at least David Barrett did and documented it in *Schism and renewal*<sup>43</sup>), and the rest is history.



Birgit Meyer would later argue that the study of African Christianity had shifted from independent churches to the study of Pentecostalism, a movement grounded in the theological notion that the church lives in the age of the Spirit.<sup>44</sup> What the anthropologist sees as human actions, Pentecostal theologians see as the presence and power of the Spirit of God (even if many theologians from other Christian traditions, myself included, think Pentecostals exaggerate). While theologians would be foolhardy to claim that they have a monopoly on what one can know about the Holy Spirit, anthropologists have something to learn from theologians about the doctrinal claims that ground the faith and behaviour of Pentecostals.

In fact, even we non-Pentecostal Christians could learn something from our Pentecostal counterparts. I remember my former Principal at the Baptist Bible Training Centre Ndu in Cameroon quoting his former teacher, Dr Charles Koller of Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Lombard, Illinois: ‘The greatest form of unemployment in all the world is the unemployment of the Holy Spirit in our lives and work’. I think that statement makes sense: that is, I think that we often don’t allow the Holy Spirit to work as much as we should, and this is an area where Pentecostals are ahead of us. But I also think that much of the focus on wealth and miracles common in Pentecostal churches is an illusion.

You might notice ambivalence on my part when it comes to Pentecostal practice. Even though my tradition defines faith as a belief in things for which we have no evidence, I find it hard to extend this idea to a world where I can pray myself into a huge treasury loaded with millions of any currency. And to the extent that this quest for wealth involves wielding influence over people who think that they will be blessed by surrendering their money to me, it’s obviously problematic. I am sure many anthropologists of Pentecostalism also think this way, but the decorum of their disciplines does not allow them to say that aloud.

(NH) As someone who has focused most of my professional energy on the anthropological study of Pentecostalism, I’ve also struggled with the same phenomenon you identify, namely the promise of lavish wealth in the context of the ‘prosperity gospel’. When it comes to this movement, I can find a lot to criticize on strictly secular terms here, but I’ve ultimately been able to move past these critiques in predictably anthropological terms. I’ve found, for instance, that most pastors in small churches aren’t getting rich on the backs of their congregations and that Pentecostal participation does important social work in the communities I’ve studied, and these findings have convinced me that the prosperity gospel is not just a scam that preys on the poor.

While ethnography has quieted my secular critiques, it has not dealt with the critiques I’ve developed on the basis of Christian theology. For example, the steep social hierarchy present in Pentecostal churches, and particularly the glorification of Pentecostal pastors, both of which my informants celebrate, are things that I find it difficult to reconcile with Christian teaching. Despite this form of Christianity’s famous theological egalitarianism, it’s clear both in my own observation and in the broader ethnographic record that African Pentecostal churches often form around pastors who are essentially Big Men.<sup>45</sup> Many times over the years I have found myself squirming in my seat as believers lauded a pastor who sat on a cushioned chair drinking bottled water while

everyone else was seated on the floor, tired and thirsty. While my informants didn't usually object to these status distinctions, and while I could reconcile them with traditional social models, to me these displays felt anathema to Christian teaching, which proclaims that those who want to be great ought to follow Jesus' example by becoming a servant.

So, as an ethnographer studying my own tradition, albeit in a very different cultural and theological context, there are religious niggles that can't be resolved. As you put it in a part of our conversation that we haven't included here, 'data are only part of the story'. This raises the question of what Tim Jenkins identifies as the 'pastoral' or corrective aspects of Christian theology.<sup>46</sup> While I do not – and probably should not – feel authorized to make interventions in Christian practice on the basis of my status as an anthropologist, I wonder if the shared ground of Christian faith, perhaps coupled with the close relationships developed in fieldwork, do provide space for that. I've certainly had informal conversations with laypeople over the years, as well as Christian leaders and friends from outside Pentecostalism, where everyone spoke critically about the prosperity gospel or about hierarchies in Pentecostal churches. I've not written much about those private exchanges, but for me they've been important points of validation – reassurance that I'm not the only person who feels something is amiss.

(EKB) I share your perspective here because this is what some of us who are critical of Pentecostal groups often miss: the reality that the majority are small churches, led by pastors who have sacrificed so much and still need to work and feed their families. These pastors are there for the members of their congregations, providing support that makes life meaningful amidst a veritable postcolonial despoliation. Pentecostal pastors are not always following the Magisterium, or conciliar statements, and standard denominational theological positions. They take the biblical text at face value in a demonstration of faith, and promote a hope which insists that by the grace and power of God all will be well. There is indeed much to celebrate here.

However, we also face the excesses of some high-profile pastors, especially on three things. First, some Pentecostal pastors are intoxicated and consumed with excessive prophetic utterances when none is needed. For example, the late T.B. Joshua of Nigeria proclaimed that he had told COVID-19 to 'go back where it came from' (though it was unclear just where he thought that was). Second, many Pentecostal leaders tend to be concerned or fascinated with things outside Africa, to the extent that most of them claimed that God had told them that President Trump would be re-elected. There is no doubt here that they thought that President Trump's leadership would help African Christians reject the quest for LGBTQI rights on the continent. Finally, many of them have cultivated a personal relationship with political leaders, and in doing so lost the moral voice to pass judgement on corruption and abuse of power. In classic Marxist terms, they have turned religion into an opium of the masses.

I would be remiss if I did not also point out that many Pentecostal leaders are concerned about the welfare of people, and are genuinely encouraging people to develop, in Norman Vincent Peal style, a positive attitude and take control of their lives, but there is a lot to be desired here. While they are building

capabilities, they are also ignoring the social structures that have created the conditions of deprivation that plague the contemporary postcolony. In calling attention to these shortcomings, theologians can emphasize that the magic of faith healing and prosperity is not working for everybody. It is working best for the Mega-Pastors with grandiose titles, who are now friends and new advisers to many corrupt politicians (a lesson they have learned very well from some American Evangelicals).

- (NH) There's definitely scope for critique here. Whether we're talking about leaders of Pentecostal mega-churches who mobilize 'prophecy' in service of prejudice or the subtler effects of 'capacity building', which normalize neoliberal ideals, there are certainly ways that both theology and ethnography speak back to these Christian communities with words of warning. I suppose the challenge is how to do the very careful work of critique in a way that balances the parallel strengths of the theologian and the ethnographer. The different approaches of the disciplines sometimes get framed in terms of different stances toward 'judgement' in theology and anthropology,<sup>47</sup> but the idea of judgement may be unnecessarily weighty, especially from a Christian perspective. After all, the Bible reminds us that the measure we use to judge will be used to judge us. (As a Christian, I suppose I'm also wary of anything that further contributes to the idea that Christians are overly judgemental people.)

I wonder if there's another term that we could use here? In a part of our conversation that I haven't included in this final version, you mentioned the role of values in faith communities, and 'value' is certainly something I've tried to work with anthropologically, and something that I find politically productive. But lately I've been especially intrigued by the idea of 'discernment',<sup>48</sup> which for me sits more comfortably with Christian practice and might also be analytically useful. For the last seven years, I've been engaged in spiritual direction, loosely grounded in the Ignatian tradition. Discernment in the context of spiritual direction is a dialogical process, grounded in listening, and in that way it is reminiscent of ethnography. I wonder what it would mean to shift our language of interdisciplinary dialogue from judgement to discernment?

I love the idea that theologically literate anthropologists were often the first to notice moments of religious innovation, especially the rise of African Independency. These grassroots, lay-led developments are the sort of thing that ethnographers are especially well positioned to capture. If we were to use the language of 'discernment' to talk about how we might engage with this process, then that may mean entering into the process of sifting – debating, disagreeing, doubting – with the communities we're part of, whether as co-religionists or ethnographers or both. This discerning together might be the start of something more communally grounded and more radically intersubjective than a lot of the interdisciplinary dialogues we've had up to this point.

What are some other ways that you could see faith opening and shaping new forms of connection between anthropology and theology?

- (EKB) My comments here remain speculative and I think an anthropologist of Christianity can speak about this more than I can. I am not an ethnographer, so I cannot say from experience if the space or ground between ethnographers and

informants shifts over time, though I have heard stories of deep bonds between researchers and their informants, and invariably their families as well.

In contrast to this connection between anthropologists and informants, a new suspicion of the theologian is emerging in Africa, ironically, as Pentecostalism grows. Anthropologists of Christianity can easily contribute to this suspicion by characterizing theologians as being especially fixated on judgement, such that there can be no dialogue between anthropologists of Christianity and theologians. Against these suspicions, I think there is room for dialogue that would be open to learn from the rich contributions of each discipline. Faith can be a critical common denominator in this interdisciplinary space as well.

- (NH) It's interesting that here you identify theologians as more prone to judgement in the face of what they might call 'unorthodox' practices – that fits with my above comments about my Christian critiques of the prosperity gospel that have not been satisfied by my anthropological analysis of it. This gets back to discernment. Another aspect of discernment, theologically speaking, is listening to and for the Holy Spirit. You mention above that this is something anthropologists often fail to do. I don't think that a lack of faith necessarily precludes an anthropologist from listening for God, and fieldwork with religious communities probably requires a degree of openness to the divine. Speaking as a Christian, I don't think we should discourage anyone who wants to try to engage with God, even just for research purposes.

Maybe instead of approaching engagement between anthropology and theology as a 'dialogue', we should be thinking of it as a broader conversation among parties that share various points of overlapping identity (critical scholarship, faith commitment, etc.). Included here would be anthropologists and theologians, as well as the communities of religious practice with which they engage, and maybe even God. Instead of a back and forth, we'd have several variegated strands of listening and critique, identification and distinction. Anthropology is especially well suited to this kind of tacking back and forth, and what you've said about the critical distance of theology makes me think there would be a strong affinity for it in your discipline as well. What do you think?

- (EKB) As a theologian, I cannot quarrel with what you identify as a key mode of proceeding: dialogue that is grounded in critical scholarship and faith commitment, that is inclusive, and would hold up for scrutiny theological assumptions in light of the quest for a humane society.

The reason why some of us have longed for a critical dialogue, especially with the new anthropology of Christianity, is that social scientists bring an approach that, for lack of a better expression, takes the faith community at face value. But one cannot expect social scientists who are impatient with the ethical impulses of theologians to go along with a dialogue.

From my perspective, it makes sense that we can have a conversation because both disciplines share a common interest, if only in the kind of themes we explore. The fact that theologians see value in the social sciences is indicative of recent developments in theology that tend to move away from

transcendental claims.<sup>49</sup> By this I mean that theologians are no longer content with pronouncements of biblical teaching alone, but are interested in studying the social, cultural, political, and economic conditions of the day. This is an emphasis that has taken seriously questions of what it means to be human. Theology is an invitation to reflect on the text, history, and social conditions to offer critical perspectives on the cultural and political manipulations that many times, at least in the African context, invoke God to perpetuate systems of governance that destroy human dignity.

I often wonder why some social scientists, whose data point to abuse, corruption, the decimation of human dignity by politicians in some African states, shy away from critical judgement, invoking science. If the evidence from social science is there, why not use it? I especially wonder why Christian anthropologists do not take this approach. Many of those who practise the anthropology of Christianity do so strictly as a discipline, but there are also some who are active members of the faith community. I wonder if these Christian anthropologists have thought of the fact that in ignoring the critical edge of theology (and many times actually describing it as elitist at conferences, etc.), they may inadvertently be validating religious and political practices which they themselves, in light of their own faith journey, may find highly problematic. The answer many Western researchers often give, 'Well it is their faith', could be seen as paternalistic or a form of politeness which insults the ability of those communities to appreciate debates on theological questions. The prerogative to follow the rules of the discipline is that of the anthropologist, and this theologian can only say that he will continue to learn from them.

(NH) That's probably a fair critique: it may indeed be that our efforts to situate practices, perhaps especially those we might find problematic, in their own cultural logics might sometimes serve as a means of excusing what are just bad practices. My question here would be on what basis we decide those practices are 'bad'. There are a few classic cases where anthropologists have not shied away from passing judgement on a 'cultural' practice, even if it was highly valued locally, for example female genital cutting. Anthropology also has no problem denouncing clear abuses of power, even as the discipline is also good at complicating what it might look like to resist power in a given setting.

What's harder to do, and what might be the unique province of anthropologists who share a common point of identity with their informants (including anthropologists who study their own religious traditions), is finding ways to critique the structures that ethnography reveals in terms that are meaningful to those they study. As you point out, at least when this comes to Christianity, this would require a degree of theological literacy, which is why I think it might be the work of religious anthropologists specifically (though I suppose that there's nothing to preclude someone making a theologically grounded critique of a tradition of which they are not a part – it just doesn't seem like the sort of thing most anthropologists would feel comfortable doing).

Reflecting on my own work, while, as I've noted, I have not shied away from voicing concerns about the prosperity gospel in my private life, and even in private conversations with my informants, I have publicly chosen to focus on the positive social outcomes of this movement. It may be that in refraining from

voicing my own judgements as clearly as I might have, at least when it came to writing, I was doing my informants (and African Pentecostals more generally) a disservice by refusing to open a space for theological pushback.

Perhaps this is a further argument for pushing past an interdisciplinary ‘dialogue’ that implies only two interlocutors. If we believe that innovation often comes from below, and that this is in fact part of the Christian story, then maybe what we should also be thinking about is how to involve Christian communities in an ongoing process of engagement, rather than asking theologians – or indeed anthropologists – to stand in as proxy representatives of those communities. Maybe judgement becomes less of a concern when there are multiple axes of judgement in play, where a group of people with alternately overlapping and diverging interests are weighing out together what’s working and what isn’t in a particular community. As scripture says, ‘In the multitude of counsellors there is safety’ (Proverbs 11: 14).

I thank you, Elias, for your insightful counsel in this dialogue. It’s certainly contributed to my own process of discernment as I think about future collaborations and conversations!

### **Revealing the self in our work**

Dr Ramdas Lamb (Ramdas) and Dr Deeksha Sivakumar (Deeksha) engaged in a series of video chat discussions about the nature of Hindu theology and anthropology while discussing how these academic disciplinary boundaries might apply to the study of indigenous religious traditions in South Asia. Ramdas is a long-standing Professor of Religion at the University of Hawai‘i, whose academic research, writings, and personal experience as a *sādhu* (renunciant, monastic) intersects with what one would term grassroots or practical Hindu theology. Deeksha, on the other hand, is a Religion scholar and a trained ethnographer who is also a practising Hindu. Through this dialogue, Deeksha reveals the challenges in being a practising Hindu and scholar simultaneously. Ramdas, through his mentorship and training, advises Deeksha on the role played by a scholar-practitioner, and how one could be true to both these roles while performing their duty to the academic study of religion. They conclude that a Hindu theologian and an anthropologist of Hinduism can both be engaged in similar practices but towards very different goals, especially if their practices engage in self-reflexivity. Deeksha transcribed their voice conversations and with the help of Ramdas developed an edited document that best reflects the breadth of their conversations.

#### *Contributors*

Ramdas Lamb (RL)

Deeksha Sivakumar (DS)

#### *Conversation*

(DS) Namaste, Ramdasji! One of the initial ways I perceived this discussion was to look at how anthropology and theology might differ from one another. Upon closer introspection, however, I realized that we must first talk about how this dialogue is very different for the study of Hinduism. I don’t recall ever meeting a Hindu theologian at the three American universities I attended. I did nonetheless read the archival works of Hindu commentators and practitioners who would qualify as theologians. Rarely did these works feature in my anthropological

study of Indian religions. When called upon to reach out to theologians in our field, I found that unless I received a referral from certain scholars who seemed comfortable advertising their religious identity, the term is rarely used. In most cases, scholars of Hinduism do not reveal their own religious practices but rather emphasize the objective orientation they bring to the study of their tradition.

Those academics who are both a scholar and practitioner of the Hindu tradition are often regarded as too subjective in the academy. In the study of ethnography, I saw the authors more self-reflective of their cultural identity, but since Hindus do not always express their faith (in those terms), the ethnographers, too, did not reveal all their commitments, caste, or religions. Anthropologists studying Hindus are placed into different camps depending on their educational training and the methodological lenses they employ. The anthropologists can be differentiated as native or indigenous vs outsider or non-native based on their ethnic and religious identities. Ethnic identity seems more obvious than caste or religious identity, which can be difficult to identify as modern Hindus do not often display their material markings through clothing or jewellery. Some feel non-native scholars are better anthropologists because of their ability to offer insights and supposed objectivity looking from the outside in, while others prefer the insight, sensitivity, and familiarity brought by a native scholar. Still others, like Kirin Narayan, suggest that native/non-native binaries are unclear as most of us fall within the messy space of living in more than one culture, and perhaps that is what makes the best kind of anthropologist. So, I would like to ask, can you be a practising Hindu and scholar at the same time, and what does that look like for a Hindu theologian?

- (RL) The Hindu tradition is an indigenous religious tradition and should be studied in that light. Hindus, Native Americans, Hawaiians, and countless other indigenous traditions and peoples share many common features not found in the Abrahamic religions. This includes their approaches to beliefs and practices, rituals, concepts of divinity, what is sacred, etc. Yet, when most academics study these traditions, they typically use the Abrahamic religions as their primary examples and paradigm for their study. Thus, they tend to miss much and misinterpret much. Here in Hawai'i, many of my students are native Hawaiian and take my courses on the Hindu tradition, often at the recommendation of one of their professors, because I focus on what it means for a tradition to be born out of the culture and practices of people as opposed to the religions that are based on the teachings or beliefs of a single person or text.
- (DS) I see, so you are saying that the theological model or that term is not based on indigenous traditions but on the Abrahamic traditions and the Western methods of understanding them?
- (RL) The term is primarily Christian, and it has both defined theology and determined how it is used. Thus, even the category for a Hindu theologian is defined in terms of Christian thought. While sometimes Brahmin priests are considered theologians in the Christian sense of the term, the actual title when applied correctly in the Hindu tradition should encompass a diverse array of people, including most gurus, all genders, non-Brahmin priests, storytellers, *sādhus* or renunciants, and even many Hindu commoners. In short, theologizing about

their tradition is a fairly common practice among Hindus, much more so than is typically the case among Westerners and academics. That is not to say that Christians and Muslims do not engage in study about their tradition's theological concepts, but a much smaller percentage do so regularly, and most will not openly discuss and even question core beliefs the way good theology needs to be done. This is much more common among Hindus, especially the devout. I should interject here that I refer to theologians as those for whom the study, understanding, and questioning concepts of the divine are all central parts of their daily thinking. In the Western context, this is generally confined to specific individuals who are academically trained to do this, i.e. 'theologians'. In the Hindu context, such formal training is not seen as necessary and thus is rarely undertaken. Therefore, one can say that many committed Hindu practitioners think theologically, in one form or another, and can be seen as what one might refer to as 'armchair theologians'. Hindus understand and believe that there are multiple paths to the divine and there is no one practice. There is a commonly recited verse from one of the earliest Hindu sacred chants, the *Rigveda*, that states, '*ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti*'. It means, 'the truth is one, but the learned call it by many names'.

Sectarian theologians, as most are, can study others' belief systems, but within the confines of their own theological paradigms. Theology schools traditionally only teach their own beliefs, such as Catholic, Baptist, Sunni Muslim, etc. How people understand theology and its practice influence how they approach the study. For committed Hindu practitioners, for example, any study that is undertaken may well be done both for academic and/or worldly purposes but also as a vehicle for learning more about the divine within oneself. In this case, all forms of study can be seen as a type of *sādhanā*, which is the daily religious practices Hindus perform as integral to their spiritual life and growth. *Sādhanā* is a Sanskrit term that means 'spiritual practice' and highlights the daily efforts and approach to learning about the divine that many Hindus take, both formal theologians and thoughtful individuals. Broadly defined as leading or guiding towards a goal and sometimes worship or propitiation, *sādhanā* refers to any effort regularly practised that moves one closer to understanding the inner self and thus understanding the divine.

It is not necessarily whether one is a theologian or an anthropologist that is the issue, but whether one is seeking to also learn about one's inner spiritual essence in the process. If I am learning about myself, what I am learning? Who am I? For most Hindus, to know who I am *is* the spiritual journey. Anthropologists typically go to the field to learn about others, usually from a totally different culture. They generally research the external life and thinking of the 'others' in order to seek a deeper understanding of the 'other', but do not necessarily apply what is learned to themselves. Most do not take the approach of self-reflection for the purpose of spiritual growth as integral to their efforts. If they do, however, then a Hindu would say they are doing *sādhanā*. Who you are actually matters little. Your intentions and how you approach life are key.

When you consider all your actions as forms of *sādhanā*, you are going to live life differently than others since your ultimate goals are different. You may be inspired by an inner voice, a teaching, or a realization that for your spiritual growth, you need to undertake certain actions and seek specific experiences



that have little or nothing to do with furthering your academic understanding or attaining some material benefit. These could include giving away material possessions that are important for your daily comfort, doing a long fast and keeping silence, spending time in close proximity with a group of lepers to learn about them and their lives, etc. Most people, including anthropologists, would not likely let themselves be 'directed' in this way unless they envision tangible benefits from doing so. As a theologian or as a spiritual seeker irrespective of your profession, you would not need to first consider practical benefits before deciding to act.

- (DS) This is a very useful way to think about one's spiritual role. But *sādhanā* for a theologian vs an anthropologist would look different according to the goals and training they have. In order to understand the goals of a researcher, ethnographers must be more comfortable revealing aspects of ourselves that are hardly disclosed during research. I often think about how many times I wish to know more about the lives of the scholars whose studies I read.

One of my academic mentors at Emory first brought this query to my attention when he asked me why there were no practising Hindu theologians in our department faculty. After confirming that I was in fact a practising Hindu and a student in the programme with an ethnographic focus, he mentioned how he was a practising rabbi who carried his own vessels during fieldwork since he couldn't eat with his interlocutors even though they were Jews. He also wondered how I conducted fieldwork as a vegetarian among communities where meat was served regularly. I realized quickly that apart from our ethnic and professional identities, our faith and personal religious identities in relation to our practices also come to the foreground when conducting field research as a Hindu anthropologist because so much of who we are is in what we do. In traditions like ours, faith is often less explicit but the everyday ethical and material practices one conducts are more visible of our affiliations and identity, making it even harder to hide.

Until I finished my Ph.D., I was quite reluctant to disclose the extent of my daily ritual life to my academic cohorts as within our tradition careful adherence to practice denotes faith. To my interlocutors, beliefs and practices are often polarizing and alienating, indicative of caste-based prejudices, and so here, too, I had to tactfully explain my own vegetarianism or family memories of religious rituals I participated in and witnessed.

For example, once while conducting research among a community of tribal women who had recently converted to Christianity, I experienced an alienating moment where I was not sure what would become of my reputation among my interlocutors. They had just prepared a large lunch for me to celebrate my visit, but the whole meal consisted of meat-based preparations. I could tell they had taken great pains to prepare this large meal for me, purchased different types of seafood and red meat, and had made elaborate dishes. The meal was costly. However, I am vegetarian and told them respectfully that I was unable to eat many of the main courses. At first, the host looked right at me, wondering why, and then their face appeared to recognize something. They immediately concluded, oh, you must be Brahmin, that is why you are not eating meat. It was a shock to me as I had witnessed other Brahmins eat meat and didn't necessarily associate this with my upbringing or caste at that time. I immediately told them, I had chosen to be

vegetarian, and had also been raised that way. They simply nodded and repeated, yes, yes, you are Brahmin so you will not eat meat. They then proceeded to serve me a simple meal of fermented spicy pickle, yoghurt, and rice. Afterwards they talked at length to me about the 'perils' of Hinduism, its caste system, and its notion of oppressing women, something they had come to understand in their journey of conversion and that was perhaps unknown to a young girl like myself. This experience had truly transformed how I perceived the people I studied as well as my role within their community. I realized at that moment that we are what we eat, and that we display our identities in material ways, too. I was now aware of how the community was also observing my practices and actions.

- (RL) One's beliefs, practices, prejudices, and agendas inevitably have a great influence on how one goes about living and learning about others, and this holds true for anthropologists as well. Many nineteenth-century British researchers in India studied 'the natives' in order to help their government better understand and control them. This was a common practice for many colonial ethnographers wherever they travelled. Some of the researchers were secular while others were strongly Christian, yet a significant number of both had obvious negative prejudices about the native peoples they met and interacted with, which is clearly revealed in their writings. Others who did anthropological fieldwork, such as Verrier Elwin, originally a Christian missionary, sought to learn about himself as well as the people he studied in India. His writings show sensitivity and self-introspection. Consequently, his writings are widely respected by indigenous anthropologists.

Theology can open doors that anthropology still has difficulty doing. During fieldwork, your gender will likely limit your access to the people you are studying and want to write about. For example, homes in Chhattisgarh have large verandas where men usually remain. Adjoining these are inner rooms where women live, cook, and rest. All the family's wealth is kept within these rooms. Traditionally, inner rooms had no electricity or windows, yet the women knew the interiors well and where everything was kept, while most men did not have access to these rooms except for special reasons, such as being newly married. As a *sādhu*, who traditionally practise celibacy and are treated as genderless, I was invited into the inner rooms on occasion by women who wanted to talk to me in private to share very personal issues in their lives, their problems, their relationships within the family, etc. As a practitioner-scholar, however, although I never wrote about these things, nevertheless the experiences helped inform my overall understanding of the situation. In my research on my monastic order, I have approached significant leaders of the order, informing them of my current academic status and focus, and have asked them critical questions and recorded most of their responses. While they always answered me, from time to time they would ask me to first turn off my recording equipment. Although they trusted in me, they told me they had little trust in academia and the way Western academics have typically distorted their beliefs and traditions.

- (DS) These challenges raise important questions about the secrets we keep, those revealed to us during our fieldwork, and the role we have in reporting or writing about the depth of experiences we have as researchers, be it as a theologian or

an anthropologist. Secrets and trust are vital criteria that are wrestled with as a theologian but rarely discussed in the training of an anthropologist.

Being of the same gender can also make certain visits permissible, especially in cultural contexts where men and women are largely segregated in public interactions. However, there are usually several limitations to a female anthropologist in the field in India, such as if one is a practising Hindu but also an unmarried woman who is seeking to write about a married woman's domestic ritual arrangement of dolls, as I did for my Ph.D. research. Initially, my conversations were terse, limited, and overtaken by male community members who saw it their duty to protect their wives' experiences and descriptions of Hindu religious rituals. Brahmin men spoke with authority to me about their wives' domestic rituals, figuring their responses were sufficient for my dissertation project. These relationships soon shifted once I was married and returned to the field and later when I returned with my infant daughter. Once married, the men stopped interacting with me and allowed me the privacy of interacting with their wives. The women, too, answered in deeper and meaningful ways. Once they found out I was married, they were like, 'Oh, now you get it'. When they saw me nursing my young baby, then the floodgates opened, and they trusted my vulnerability to them and saw me as a real person. These are the things I haven't written much about, but which shaped my understanding of the metaphysical, and how much the cosmic world is part of everything that happens in practitioners' lives. As a scholar-practitioner who is ethnically Indian, I was someone who could avoid the challenges in being fully a theologian or only an anthropologist. It is a middle category wherein one can be within a faith tradition and ask the important questions nestled in the study of anthropology. An outsider may not have the context to have reverence of a particular tradition or even be able to interpret what is appropriate or out of context. Also, as a person from within the informant's faith tradition, you come to know some aspects from within. Knowing what valence something might have, and because you have context, you can re-question things that you have once heard if it seems incoherent from a certain line of thinking. A non-native anthropologist may accept the answer and think it is valid because they don't have the context to think this is out of place.

During my Ph.D., I undertook a concentration at the Divinity School in Practical Theology, where I had the opportunity to think more about how theology and anthropology support one another's pitfalls, especially in the study of religion. A lot of traditions have mysticism, exorcism – they have often been kept within secret traditions. The scholarly lens already presumes you are bringing these things to light. That gaze is problematic, because it highlights things that shouldn't be brought to life, and they can ultimately expose things. I think that theology often handles these alternative forms of thinking in a more direct way. What I mean by this is that theology, by virtue of having one of its conversation partners as G/gods, inherently values and accepts the notion that how we acquire knowledge can be ineffable, an approach that cannot be easily put into words. Anthropology, on the other hand, leans on participant observation and the anthropologist's ability to analyse and narrate the interactions between gods or supernatural and human. In that sense, anthropology translates these exchanges in a way that is palatable to an academic audience and many times there is something lost. Theology's acceptance that G/god-human exchanges do

occur proves a useful building block that allows researchers to investigate deeper, especially when studying religion or religious practices.

(RL) What you are saying is especially true in the case of possession. I once had the opportunity to witness my monastic guru perform an exorcism on a girl whose family believed she was possessed by an evil spirit. It is commonplace in India for people to ask *sādhus* to help them with such difficulties. The process took three days before my teacher ‘exorcized’ the spirit, and, in the end, I saw almost a complete transformation of the patient from when she and her family had arrived at my guru’s compound. This process can be understood in several ways. One can believe that the spirit was there and now has departed. Another approach is to say to oneself, ‘Here is an individual and a family who needs help, so I must do something that the family has faith in so that they will now look positively upon this person who can now be reintegrated into the family’. This is but one of a myriad of ways that theologians can deal with the issues involving the people with whom they interact. As outsiders, many anthropologists would avoid personal involvement in such situations and remain observers only. That is not to say they would not be sympathetic in the situation. The insider is going to see something different because the goals are ultimately different, because the latter wants to heal the patient. I think we all know anthropologists who would get involved, wanting to help. However, most, including myself, would likely leave those incidents out of anything that gets written for others.

(DS) However, theology does encounter some pitfalls that anthropology can help navigate, which primarily have to do with adherence to dogma or belief. Theologians from specific denominations might find it very difficult to think outside of their systems of belief, especially when their faith and its repercussions are unexplained without the context of a supernatural being. An anthropologist, on the other hand, can offer a variety of explanations for religious practices that are rooted in cultural, economic, and societal norms and not necessarily reliant on the doctrines of a theological practice. An example for this situation is where an anthropologist of South Indian religious traditions, Kalpana Ram, provided the economic impact of rice farming practices among fishing communities of rural, coastal, central Tamil Nadu because she theorized that rice stores better than fish and is a source of better income, allowing this community to grow in value within their region in ways that their neighbouring fishing communities could not.<sup>50</sup> This was reflected in Mukkuvar women’s vital role in rituals for the local Tamil goddess and their husbands’ role as drummers.

But this is not always the case. Sometimes our moral/ethical reasoning can obfuscate how we view a community. Where I saw this come up in my own work was on the subject of child marriage, which to date has not been adequately described or understood among those cultures where it was widely practised. In many of the homes where I observed the doll festival as a familial tradition over several generations, women were married between the ages of 11 to 14 up until the early twentieth century. Since many of the British researchers from the nineteenth century – as you, Ramdasji, have also pointed out – were either rationalists, Christians, or men, their moral leanings seem to have influenced twentieth-century Indian anthropologists and scholars about how they viewed

child marriage, and thus those who wrote about this subject in India didn't have any decent analyses, for my purposes, that adequately explained the stories of the women who experienced marriage at a young age. Moreover, for my research, the context of a doll festival or doll-related dowry materials carried from natal to marital homes garners a valence if understood in the context of these younger child marriages. For this reason, I struggled a lot with unhinging biases in my own fieldwork, even among practitioners who had adopted this modernist point of view, rather than gain useful insights about the nature of child marriage and the woman's experience of it. As an anthropologist, you do this a lot. You must interpret what prescriptions are made by a tradition vis-à-vis the historical data and societal treatment of those issues. A fieldworker may have their own moral leaning, but their foremost purpose relies upon bringing forth the perspective of the other in a way that is translatable to the current audience. What role does moral/ethical reasoning serve in such research? Can it be to bring a new perspective on a traditional issue like human rights?

(RL) Here at my university, students have to take an ethics-focused class, in which 30 per cent of the grade is based on the students' understanding of concepts of ethics. In my ethics courses, I begin by explaining to the students that I will refer to ethics in the social context and morality in a personal context and also try to get them to think about what the concept of 'goodness' means to them. How do they conceptualize practice of goodness in their lives? Who is good person? In the issue of abortion, for example, what is the moral stance of the mother-to-be? Does she consider it in this situation? Does it justify what she is doing? How about people who are anti-abortion? What is their moral stance, and does it justify what they are doing? I then ask my students to look at the two approaches and see if they can perceive an ethical grounding in each position. I do not say that for them to assume that everything is relative. Instead, I want them to focus on who is hurt in any situation, and who is benefited. In most morally complex situations, somebody will be hurt. If in both situations someone is hurt and someone is benefited, then I ask them to consider who is the most innocent of those involved in the situation. If they seek to prevent harm, I ask them to consider who should be most protected first. I also ask them if they think it is possible to prevent harm to everyone involved. This is done in the hopes that the students will work to develop their own moral compass. My approach is a relatively common one for many theologians, including those who may belong to one of the Abrahamic religions. I use it since I believe that having a moral compass is important for the students' spiritual growth irrespective of their belief system or lack thereof. This is an example of something I do not think many anthropologists would feel comfortable doing.

When I go to another culture and see actions that are contrary to my own, I simply try to understand why they are done. If, on the other hand, they go against my own moral compass, then I might mention that it is not something I would do and ask them if anyone in their community ever sees moral difficulty in such actions. Of course, I do not do so in an accusatory way but to better understand how those actions fit into their ethical or moral paradigms. For example, in the Indian state of Kerala, there are Hindus who sacrifice a chicken during a particular ritual, something that is contrary to a commonly accepted

Hindu concept of non-violence. If I went there to study them, I might ask the people how they understand the concept of non-violence in relation to the ritual they are performing and how it fits into their ethical framework. I might also ask participants what other Hindus in the area think about the ritual practice. I would clearly not press the issue, but listening to their response could help me gain a deeper understanding of how people there conceptualize their world and reality. In the process, it might give me added insight into an aspect of the tradition I was previously unaware of. Such questions would not be asked simply as an anthropologist but for my own personal growth as well. Since most anthropologists tend to be agnostic when it comes to their research, they may not consider asking what they might consider deeply personal questions of a religious nature. I do understand that approach, but not doing so might also cause them to miss out on some valuable insight into the world of values of the people they are studying.

- (DS) I, too, wish to emphasize that many times one sliver of a perspective is used to describe a whole tradition or practice attempting to generalize or formulate a cohesive narrative. In a country as diverse as India, where the same ritual is celebrated in different ways, it cannot be the same throughout the country, and all the diversity does not often add up to the same analysis. In this case, it seems paramount to remain contextual, which is a lens that ethnography can nurture and bolster.
- (RL) So, you know what they say? In the land of the blind, the one-eyed is king! All our prejudices create boxes from which we view the world. We all live in multiple worlds. Those of us who have academic expertise and practical grounding within a tradition can see things that those who are simply scholars may not. At the same time, our scholarly training gives us the ability to help those who are simply practitioners of a tradition see perspectives they don't understand as well. Intention brings forth the self into the study and likens it to a holistic educational model where we are not just presenting and collecting data. The boundaries of theologian and anthropologist can be broken down when the researcher exists in both worlds and also does so as part of a path to self-realization and to practising truth and compassion for others.

### **Traversing the boundaries of the modern secular university: an anthropologist and an Islamic studies scholar in dialogue**

A virtual conversation held in February 2021 between anthropologist Khaled Furani and Islamic studies scholar Ebrahim Moosa furnished themes for composing this dialogue in writing through a back-and-forth exchange. While beginning and ending with the question of what is 'religion', how it relates to life, and whether this category, as bestowed by secular reason, does justice to those orienting their life in relation to faith practices, it ultimately centres on the role 'theology' could or should play as an 'outsider' discipline in the modern university. Cognizant of inveterate Christian predominance in this field of scholarship, the interlocutors draw upon their Muslim tradition, suggesting ways the experiences, sensibilities, practices, and conceptions it provides could contribute to rethinking the modern academic enterprise that is anthropology and even the very faculty of thinking. Recognizing that this conversation

merely touches upon ideas – far from exhausting them – they hope it will inspire many further explorations.

### Contributors

Khaled Furani (KF)

Ebrahim Moosa (EM)

### Conversation

(KF) My interest in theology comes out of my practice of secular anthropology as well as of Islam. So my forays into trying to understand modern anthropology's vast alienation from theology has in part been a way to face a series of questions that emerge when I try to attend to the simultaneous claims made on my intellectual formation by my academic and 'religious' traditions in conditions of modernity. How do I belong to an academy that tells me religion is a bounded realm within life and a religion that tells me that at minimum it is coterminous with it? Must I sequester my 'religion' in order to pursue scholarship? What might happen if I don't?

These are some of the questions that have occupied me lately and led to my resorting to the category of 'theology' as a way of reapproaching anthropology. My use of theology here is thus strategic, in that I do not aim with the help of theology to reinstitute its truths insofar as it is, and this is crucial, the name for a form of an intellectual inquiry or academic discipline in the Christian tradition.

Perhaps, Ebrahim, you will convince me otherwise; you will convince me that my commitments to theology are alive and well in my writing and thinking if you persuade me that an ecumenical and even elastic sense of theology is at work. But at least consciously, in addition to my particular strategic employment, I remember how theology is the name of a particular discipline in Christianity, and I feel it is important that I retain a memory of the historical unease, or rather scepticism, with its emergence as a science in Islamic history, otherwise known as the 'science of speech' (*'ilm al-kalām*). But perhaps all these equivocations are about my need to stress that I am not writing with partisanship for the theological (as the name of a discipline); rather I am 'using' the theological for ends elsewhere.

I use this category insofar as I find it capable of opening anthropology to 'theistic sediments' of the intellect, which have been subjected to erosion for much of the discipline's history. I am reminded here, for example, of Mary Douglas, a committed Catholic, who expressed a wish of wanting to carve out a 'safe space' for belief within anthropology, or conversely recall Marshall Sahlins, who designated anthropology as a form of 'Talmudic exegesis on the world' in that it consecrated a space for 'non-believers'.<sup>51</sup> How Protestant of him to speak so. My point is that in reaccessing such 'theistic sediments', they can serve as a 'rope' or 'ladder' to get to places we might not otherwise be able to reach within secular strictures.

(EM) Thanks, Khaled, for clarifying your understanding and employment of 'theology'. With my training in Islamic law and theology in traditional institutions (madrasas) combined with religious studies and philosophy, my work is interdisciplinary and attentive to history. Theology in the Muslim tradition, historically speaking, includes truth claims about God but also about sound

forms of knowing. In other words, the questions of theology are about epistemology. How do we know? What are the correct forms of knowing? Theology is normative because it presents itself as the grounds for knowing the truth. The eleventh-century Muslim theologian, rather the polymathic thinker, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) thinks of theology as ‘first philosophy’, a line straight out of Aristotle. Muslim theologians foundationally relied on metaphysical propositions (*al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*) for their truth claims about God and knowledge of the world.

I see this understanding of theology as challenging your claim to lack theological commitments. While you or any other anthropologist might not explicitly write from such a position, I wish to ask: is an anthropologist not interested in truth or discovering the truths held by her subjects? Once an anthropologist explores other people’s meanings and their truths, might she fail to keep a distance between her own commitments and theirs? Her subjects’ truths might force her to question her notion of the truth and, in a self-reflexive move, question her own truth commitments, call them philosophical or theological truths. And why would a reader not be interested in the commitments of the anthropologist and how she views the world and translates the world she is observing? This is, of course, an old debate but takes different forms today.

- (KF) I think you raise a very provocative question, and indeed we should keep in mind that theology has everything to do with truth claims. I see the challenge lying in that at least in the modern academy, including in my discipline of anthropology, theology has been completely banished from evaluations of truth claims, even considered the antithesis of truth, belonging more to the realm of fantasy, if not outright delusion. So for me, to evoke theology is to signal that the question of God remains legitimately alive in the life of the intellect, even giving it a life-enhancing power. This means, and forgive me the Orientalist-sounding metaphor, that it functions like a ‘flying carpet’, in that theology takes or can take us to the edges of thinking, to the edges of speech, to unpredictable beginnings, to what Hannah Arendt would call natality. Through theology, we are able to face the unsayable or the unthinkable as a legitimate part of thinking, and not only by its very nature, but because it stands as an other, an outsider to anthropology.

Imagine looking at American whiteness from the exteriority that is Black America, or looking at Israeli Jewishness from the exteriority that is the Palestinian. What does that vantage point enable you to see that would otherwise remain assumed or invisible? It is in this same sense of ‘outsiderness’ that one can observe how ‘thinking happens’, including the anthropological variant of thinking, with the aid of the theological, its other, so to speak. In other words, and perhaps ironically, theology today, perhaps to the chagrin of reason enlightened along secular lines, appears especially equipped to enable a probing of the conditions of possibility for our thinking (and thinking’s relation to living) in ways that may not be possible under the tyrannies of a secular type of reason.

- (EM) Khaled, your view and use of ‘theology’ is now becoming clearer to me. But it remains unclear as to why you still retain as your working definition that theology originates as an ‘intellectual inquiry or academic discipline in the Christian tradition’. You need not restrict yourself to a Christian definition! You



already referenced *'ilm al-kalām* as the discipline in Muslim thought centred on discursivity and disputation. Here we find contestations about truth claims related to God's essence and divine attributes; how God's omnipotent will is different from God's benevolent purpose; questions about whether the good and the detestable are knowable through reason or if such a determination requires guidance from revelation; how one gains salvation; and the nature of the cosmos and the universe. All these matters and more systematically and over time fall in the realm of *kalām*.

Let's just agree that when I use the term 'theological', I mean the way I define it here, despite the narrow sequencing of the concept in historical Christendom. Modern Christian theology has become expansive at the hands of notable theologians like Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and John Milbank. And, historically, Muslim debates on the essence of *'ilm al-kalām* became quite expansive, especially as it started to bleed into philosophy. So much so that by the fourteenth century the noted polymath and jurist-theologian Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 1390) observed that the difference between theology and philosophy by his time was not that significant. Of course, there have been naysayers to both theology and philosophy in the Muslim tradition, precisely because of this cultural entanglement with the Greek legacy, which some thought was helpful and necessary while others felt that the Muslim tradition was self-sufficient and did not need the epistemological insights adopted from Hellenic frameworks, hence the differences in Muslim theologies.

(KF) I am struck by your phrase 'theology became expansive'. Had it not been already expansive? Your observation brings to my mind John Henry Newman's commending theology for its integrative power, placing it higher than other faculties such as philosophy, law, or medicine. I see Newman recognizing in theology an ability to integrate forms of knowledge, an ability not found in these other domains, so the modern university shrunk knowledge by excising theology out of its body.

In thinking about this capacity of theology, I am visited by a sense that theology could be anthropology's staff, as in Mūsā's/Moses' staff. I imagine anthropology, guided by theology's staff, to reckon with itself as an inheritor – historical and thus contingent, to be sure – of philosophy in the West, or, more precisely, anthropology as inheritor of tasks with which philosophy in the West has been charged.

I am aided in these feelings by imagining Wittgenstein seeking to heal us from the bewitchments of philosophy ending up being, in a certain sense for me, an exemplar for an ethnographic investigation on the faculty of thinking, given his focus on 'forms of life'. He illustrates to my mind an intellect (as does Simon Weil in the Catholic tradition, Walter Benjamin in the Jewish messianic tradition, and Ibn 'Arabi in Islam) whose encounter with the Other could help with assessing the extent of anthropology's accomplishment in becoming a 'science of culture': that is, evaluating what was lost and what was gained in acquiring 'scientific' standing in the modern academy.

(EM) I was cryptic in my claim that theology became expansive. What I meant to say was that as the Muslim discursive tradition developed over time, a

multitude of disciplines related to Muslim life from ethics, law, dogma, ritual and practice, astronomy, and the grammatical and rhetorical disciplines all continued to grow, expand, and undergo change due to the encounters of Muslim cultures and societies with different terrains and temporalities. On *'ilm al-kalām*, there is a fervent debate as to whether one really needs ontological and epistemological frameworks to understand the divine and especially the role of the divine in the world. Some believe that the plain and simple faith statements of early Islam are sufficient and do not require reformulation and refinement using 'external' Greek knowledge frameworks. The nominalist Arabic linguistic formulations are sufficient. My point was that Taftāzānī favoured that integration of multiple knowledge forms, which John Henry Newman came to do later in Christendom. So, I was just sensitive to not leave the impression that this expansion of the disciplinary category was uncontested in the past and in the present.

Khaled, I notice a shift in your position from your opening gambit on how you thought about theology as 'Christian' and your lack of a particular theological commitment to your probing questions on how thinking happens. I would say that exploring these difficult questions with the help of normative sources of knowledge – revelation, resources of tradition, history, as well as engaged and embodied forms of reason – does bring one into the realm of the theological.

I acknowledge my commitment to these sources of tradition because they allow me to belong to a tradition and community of knowledge. And in my normative work, I connect to communities of faith and truth based on shared frameworks of knowledge and being. My commitments to other sources of knowledge, modern and ancient, at times happen seamlessly and at other times they arrive agonistically. All this allows me to say how I relate to multiple communities of truth and inquiry. And with this broad template of knowledge, in some ways, I follow the cosmopolitan Muslim tradition. Yet I am aware that the newer and contemporary frames of knowledge and modes of existence also generate aporias and insoluble questions, which force one to probe and wrestle. As the Qur'an, would say, 'Adore (worship) your Lord, until you reach certainty' (15:99). I see my participation in the search and exploration of knowledge as a mode of adoring God that some might express as worship, and what a sublime way of doing so.

- (KF) I appreciate your refusal of walls between 'adoring God' and 'searching' or 'exploring'. It invites us to think of modalities that could populate the dialogic relation, existing or imagined, between anthropology and theology. For a while I have been asking myself about the difference between acts of prayer and acts of ethnographic immersion. To put it bluntly, I have been asking myself: if the dialogue, or if 'translation', happens between the languages of theology and modern anthropology, in what ways might it be right to recognize ethnographic fieldwork as a kind of prayer, or conversely 'prayer' as an ethnographic fieldwork? After all, no secularism seems to have stopped Clifford Geertz from hinting, wittingly or not, at this affinity in recognizing the 'ego-effacement' that fieldwork requires.<sup>52</sup> In what ways do both prayer and immersion in the field call for the cultivation of the art of 'letting go'? Does not prayer, like immersion, involve potentially at least a 'voyage' or 'depaysement'?

These are some of the questions that arise when I approach theology as 'exterior' to secular reason. I imagine theology as a mirror enabling secular reason to face its conditions of possibility. Two realms of reflection stand out for me. First, theology can be our mirror for asking about who the knowledge-seeker is or might be. Second, theology can be our mirror for asking about where thinking happens. Notice that, for the purpose of our exchange, I am treating knowledge and thinking as synonyms, even though I suspect there are good reasons to refrain from doing that. My attention to this activity helps stress my point that theology need not only work, as is happening in much anthropological rapprochement towards it, to better our understanding of religion. In 'reinstating' this banished form of inquiry, theology might, or so my premise runs, help us regain a certain humility towards all knowledge-seeking.

(EM) If I understand you correctly, Khaled, then I agree with you about theology as a mirror for the self of the investigator and producing a disposition of a certain humility towards knowledge. To say, 'I do not know' is a treasured piece of wisdom. Theology is also one source to identify the location of the one making an inquiry. Perhaps my perspective on the location and self of the investigator resembles yours. I agree with you that there are varieties of knowledge traditions, as well as genealogical approaches, where genealogy is a form of critique. The latter approach, as you fully know, is Foucauldian, is not against the history of knowledge traditions. But I do not view origins as determining a tradition. It is important that we give sufficient attention to the fragility of historical forms. However, I do believe one needs to give an account for changes to tradition and modes of thinking. I am a little bit agnostic about theology as 'exterior' to secular reason, especially when deploying a genealogical approach. Perhaps you would clarify my (mis)reading of your claim. I think of all knowledge as capable of self-reflection and facing its condition of possibility, just as even a simple sign, such as a street name, can provide openings to self-reflection. I am reminded of a fascinating insight of the poet-philosopher of pre-partition India Muhammad Iqbal, who wrote:

The nature of an act, however secular in its import, is determined by the attitude of mind with which the agent does it. It is the invisible mental background of the act which ultimately determines its character. An act is temporal or profane if it is done in a spirit of detachment from the infinite complexity of life behind it; it is spiritual if it is inspired by that complexity.<sup>53</sup>

In this vein, I think a theological lens would make the anthropological lens more capacious in the same way that anthropological insights have greatly leavened the study of religion and theology. Those who banish theology from the knowledge enterprise at large do so at a price and they must account for it. It is a prejudice injected into the field of Western religious studies to have kept theology, however sophisticated, out of the knowledge equation on the part of a few gatekeepers who then ironically have turned their methodological position into an article of faith!

The objection to theology being an object of study in a secular university on the part of some, not all, scholars is that theology does not allow its fundamental teachings to be questioned or subjected to critical inquiry. Feuerbach would beg to differ, but he remains alone. Religious studies scholars discussing dogmas?

Perish the thought! This stance has resulted in the impoverishment of the field of religious studies and the study of theology in the Western academy. But this is not necessarily true elsewhere.

- (KF) I have directly encountered the ‘censorship’ you describe. My willingness to speak the language of theology, as it were, touched insecurities, encroached upon the edges that the religious studies field has sought to fortify for itself. I was explicitly told that transgressing the secular bounds of anthropology is better suited for the pulpit than for religious studies. Ironically, I was also told in the very same breath to provide concrete evidence of secular disciplining at work! The *JRAI*’s invitation to hold this conversation shows to me that anthropologists appear more hospitable than religious studies scholars to take seriously the claims of theology in constructing its own truth claims, as well as to take religion seriously, study it from within, as it were.

Even so, my sense is that there is a lot of work yet to be done when it comes to anthropologists opening up to theology, especially beyond its capacity to aid in the study of religion. I would like to see us daring to ask how theology can speak to our entire being or becoming. For example, what is it about theology that can prepare us, perhaps better than anthropology today, to grapple with the edge of thinking, such as engaging with a notion, to invert Descartes: ‘I think, therefore I am not?’

In the very last line of his seminal *Nuer religion* published sixty-five years ago, E.E. Evans-Pritchard announces that he arrived at the point where the theologian must ‘take over’ from the anthropologist.<sup>54</sup> I wonder if we anthropologists might finally be ready to ‘cross over’ ourselves, with the help of the theologian as a slayer of earthly sovereignties. I understand this ‘crossing over’ as ceasing to take as self-evident the sovereignty of thought and that of the thinking subject. To do so may require mobilizing theology’s integrative power to even fundamentally question the modern research university as it exists today.

- (EM) I appreciate your efforts to transform your discipline by posing critical questions to the field of anthropology and the academy, too. I wish to direct your attention to a concern I have as a scholar of Islam. If this issue does not arise as a problem in your work, then let me share it as my problem and your thoughts will be appreciated.

I wonder if you find anthropological research on Muslim subjects results in difficulties in explaining matters related to the field of *dīn*, unfortunately generally translated as ‘religion’. As for the term ‘religion’, it has been translated differently into multiple Islamicate languages. And modern political theologies, as well as the modern humanities and social sciences of a Western provenance, have forced Muslim intellectual traditions to internalize the category of religion knowingly and unknowingly, such that it signifies itself as distinct from, and even in opposition to, the secular or the worldly. Even in languages where the term *dīn* is retained, such as in Indonesian, Malay, and Urdu, the semiosis of the term has adjusted to the modern reality of religion as private, internal, and spiritual. While the internal and the spiritual are certainly not excluded from *dīn*, you know that they do not amount to the sum of its meanings.

In thinking of how it could be useful to secular disciplines like anthropology along the lines you describe, I have been trying to understand the category of *dīn* historically and its signification over time. In seventh-century Arabia, the Prophet Muḥammad declared that his *dīn* is similar to the *dīn* of Abraham and Moses and different from the *dīn* of the polytheists. Here *dīn* refers to a set of acts of obedience. In other words, there are acts one is required to perform in order to gain God's favour in this world and to attain salvation in the hereafter. *Dīn* also evokes that which is habitual or customary, but in the sense that the customary is binding. In other words, for that early community of Muslims, *dīn* is organically embedded into an elaborate lifeworld.

I hardly think the first hearers of the invitation to the *dīn* of Muḥammad in Arabia spent much time thinking about what it meant. *Dīn* meant a person belonged to her or his practices, habits, and way of life. The Qur'an mentions that the Prophet Muḥammad's adversaries also had their own *dīn*. Early Muslims would be surprised to learn that some modern Muslims have created a wall or a boundary within life between *dīn* and non-*dīn*, because for them *dīn* is *in* and *from* the fabric of life. But once early Muslims found themselves outside an Arabian space in other regions of the Near East and beyond, they quickly had to systematize and organize the acts of *dīn* through formal categories, especially normative categories, to clarify what constitute acts towards attaining salvation.

The idea of the secular has also raised confusion for many Muslim thinkers in the modern period. The reception of this term in contemporary Muslim societies retains the ambiguity of a more inclusive category where acts of *dīn* and acts of the world (*dunyā*) are not impermeable. They bleed into each other since life is lived in such a fluid register. I wonder what your encounters with anthropological discussions of *dīn* have taught you in trying to retain the Muslim experience of *dīn* as you reach for the crossing over to theology of which you speak.

(KF) Indeed, *dīn* is what I have been trying to come to terms with as part of the Muslim inheritance that orients my life in working in a secularly conditioned academic discipline. How, I have been asking, might *dīn*, as part of understanding what Islam is, affect what I do (and don't do) as an anthropologist?

As for anthropological research of Islam, if we 'listen' to language in the almost trivial sense, we should be readily able to discern that 'religion' as a modern category cannot possibly do 'translational justice' to *dīn*. I am thinking, for example, of how the word in Arabic, at least in its Qur'anic locution (e.g. 3:9; 3:85; 109:6), as well as the remarkable agility of the tripartite root d.a.n, means that *dīn* resonates with a way of life, a mode of comportment, law, compliance, accountability, judging, indebtedness, and so on.

Clearly 'religion', especially after Luther set it on its modern course, is incapable of allowing us to say what *dīn* has allowed to be said in the past and might still be capable of saying today. So you raise a very important question about anthropological studies of Islam, and in some ways there is where we can find the most concerted efforts to take religion seriously, to 'cross over', as it were. I am thinking especially of recent works in the anthropology of Islam and of Christianity that emerged after Talal Asad's *Formations of the secular* came out in 2003.<sup>55</sup> However, I am not aware of anthropological studies explicitly engaging with *dīn* per se.

Indeed, I feel that this problem cannot be sufficiently addressed if ‘taking religion seriously’ remains only the purview of those anthropologists who study Islam, or other religions for that matter. To the extent that all of anthropology is a kind of adventure in translation (of course producing mistranslations as well), it needs to diversify this ‘seriousness’. How can ‘taking religion seriously’ mean more than vindicating the rationality of mostly theistic beliefs and, to a lesser extent, theistically driven practices that, typically and crucially, others whom anthropologists observe sustain, but which they do not sustain themselves? What might happen if we allow *dīn* to live again with the world, with *dunyā* and not merely within it?

Perhaps ‘taking religion seriously’ also means ‘letting go’ of it. By letting go, by surrendering, I mean a very precise thing: letting go of the need to define it, of the desire to confine it as a demarcated category. I guess I am wondering when we will be able to relinquish our need for ‘ostensible definitions’ of religion. Perhaps then *dīn* (Islam and others) could emerge as something greater than what the modern category ‘religion’ allows for. I suspect that if we let go of our desire for a kind of definition that ‘apprehends’ it, if we let it be, as it were, as we try to observe it as clearly and openly as possible, that is, observe the ways it lives in the daily pulses of the life of its upholders, we might in time come closer to puzzles that have been left abandoned, crucially puzzles about ourselves. Ironically, then, I have been wondering if these two disciplines – theology and anthropology (with their chequered history in the study of difference in the West) – act together, could they emancipate *dīn*/religion from the iron cage of Religion?

I see this ‘emancipation’ as implying that we need to be ready to explore what undoing a whole host of binary relations might entail. I am thinking of binaries that over time have gained axiomatic status precisely because *dīn*/religion was made to appear as antithetical to, rather than a cultivator of, life. If and when committed to this untethering, theology and anthropology might lead us to investigate conditions for, and consequences of, no longer pitting religion against politics, worshipping against inquiring, and reason against revelation. They could also help us refrain from severing a self’s sense of freedom from its submission or its fulfilment from its ‘emptiness’.

So if, say, someone like Descartes has in some sense inaugurated the ideal (or Baconian ‘idol’) of the modern individual whose existence hinges on thinking while sovereign, how might a joint venture of theology and anthropology not anxious to define *dīn* help us restore our learning capacities for appreciating, for example, the adage stating aporetically, to approximate the original Arabic: ‘For my existence I disappear from Existence (*Wujūdi an aghība ‘an al-wujūd*)’?

- (EM) I think I have faced a similar disquiet in my own encounters with secular anthropology. I have found that anthropologists in their conversation about ‘religion’ in the modern sense have spent a disproportionate amount of time theorizing this category, generating notions that, to my mind, place profound limits on experience, producing a very narrow vision or understanding. By contrast, there are real-life sites of Muslims practising *dīn* which could reveal an entire world of practice outside the privatized domain of ‘religion’. Sometimes the contemporary Muslim practice of *dīn* is shaped by modern notions of religion imposed by state bureaucracy, laws, and cultures, but these developments cannot

contain the power of *dīn* as embedded in tradition and that to some extent remains unbridled by Western categories.

So while I appreciate your rationale for ‘untethering’ *dīn* from definitions and semantics, I am concerned that without them the category of *dīn* can get fairly nebulous. Perhaps we view this differently, but I fear we could find ourselves on a ‘slippery slope’ where everything can then be *dīn* and also nothing can be *dīn*. Definitions are important to my mind, otherwise we speak at cross-purposes. Definitions and their incarnation in language and life are neither permanent nor static, they are historical, too. I think premodern Muslims grasped the category of *dīn* fairly efficiently and effectively. I doubt *dīn* can be left to itself; it is part of the warp and woof of life and practice.

Al-Ghazālī named his magnum opus the *Revivification of the sciences of dīn* (*Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*). He felt the need to *translate* knowledge and meaning related to obedience to God and salvation. He identified those mundane acts of life that become purposeful when undertaken in the penumbra of the light of obedience to God. He saw knowledge sought in pursuit of obedience as praiseworthy, yet blameworthy when sought in pursuit of opposite aims.

Another way of putting it is that *dīn* is relational to the embodied obedient subject. The term ‘obedience’ at the centre of *dīn* is antithetical to the modern sensibility that valorizes choice and freedom. And there has been an entire effort by modern Muslim interpreters to retranslate the term *dīn* and place the emphasis on one very remote semantic thread of ‘debt’. Often modern interpreters pursue this undertaking on very shaky historical and philological grounds. Their goal is to create a contractual relationship between subject and God, to parallel the relationship between citizen and state. Now I concede that theological concepts, too, undergo change. However, I want modern Muslims to account for this hybrid, old-new dimension as part of a historical development. And I think if anthropologists take advantage of the theological lenses I am gesturing towards, much could be gained to map the practice of *dīn* in Muslim societies and differentiate these practices from other contexts. And as you seem to indicate, should anthropology adopt this approach to *dīn* and hence to life, thinking, and learning, it could move towards the vision of that pursuit of knowledge that it appears we both, on some level, share.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> These conversations include reflections upon the suitability of the terms ‘theology’ and ‘theologian’ for each context.

<sup>2</sup> See Havea (2003).

<sup>3</sup> Jione uses the lower case when he is the subject of the first person ‘I’. For two reasons: first, because in English and Tongan the lower case is used with the second and third persons, and, second, because capitalizing the first-person singular is evidence of privileging the individual self (an ailment of modernity and of the English language).

<sup>4</sup> Mead’s reputation in Sāmoa is not especially good. Tomlinson’s point here is that some of his Samoan interlocutors saw anthropology as potentially more problematic than religious affiliation or commitment.

<sup>5</sup> See Havea (2011; 2014); Te Paa Daniel (2011).

<sup>6</sup> See Havea (1998).

<sup>7</sup> See Kirsch (2020).

<sup>8</sup> Tomlinson (2020: 108).

<sup>9</sup> Tofaeono (2010).

<sup>10</sup> Havea (2021a).

- <sup>11</sup> Havea (2021*b*).
- <sup>12</sup> Havea (2021*c*).
- <sup>13</sup> Abu-Lughod (1991: 137).
- <sup>14</sup> Ahmed (2015).
- <sup>15</sup> Izutsu (1964).
- <sup>16</sup> Robbins (2006).
- <sup>17</sup> Kahn (2011).
- <sup>18</sup> Fountain (2013).
- <sup>19</sup> Messick (2018).
- <sup>20</sup> Agrama (2012); Amster (2013); Pandolfo (2018); Rasanayagam (2011).
- <sup>21</sup> Hallaq (2009; 2011).
- <sup>22</sup> Williams (2008).
- <sup>23</sup> Asad (1986).
- <sup>24</sup> Hodgson (1974: 57).
- <sup>25</sup> MacIntyre (2007).
- <sup>26</sup> Hallaq (2019); Hashas (2020). A similar point has been made in Lahham (2015).
- <sup>27</sup> According to the *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, the five aggregates (or *skandhas*) are the physical form, feelings, perception, impulse, and consciousness (<http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=%E4%BA%94%E8%98%8A>).
- <sup>28</sup> For a Humanistic Buddhist account of the figure of the bodhisattva, see Hsing Yun (1999).
- <sup>29</sup> For a more detailed account, refer to Makransky (2011: 119-33).
- <sup>30</sup> Tambiah (1984: 7).
- <sup>31</sup> Hsing Yun (2016).
- <sup>32</sup> 'Fundamentally, then, there are no religions that are false. All are true after their own fashion: All fulfil given conditions of human existence, though in different ways' (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 2).
- <sup>33</sup> Robbins (2013).
- <sup>34</sup> Laidlaw & Mair (2019).
- <sup>35</sup> The Communities of Practice Sunday check-in resources can be found at <https://community.thebbep.org/2021-sunday-check-in/>.
- <sup>36</sup> For more information, see <https://www.facebook.com/turningpointstories/>.
- <sup>37</sup> Harvey (2000: 134).
- <sup>38</sup> Executive Board, American Anthropological Association (1947).
- <sup>39</sup> Laidlaw (2013: chap. 1).
- <sup>40</sup> Mair & Evans (2015).
- <sup>41</sup> Rapport (2018).
- <sup>42</sup> Wohlleben (2016).
- <sup>43</sup> Barrett (1968).
- <sup>44</sup> Meyer (2010).
- <sup>45</sup> E.g. McCauley (2013).
- <sup>46</sup> Jenkins (2018).
- <sup>47</sup> McKearney (2016).
- <sup>48</sup> Thanks to Andreas Bandak for first orientating me towards this term.
- <sup>49</sup> Cochrane (2018); Vicencio (1995).
- <sup>50</sup> Ram (1992).
- <sup>51</sup> Douglas (2005: 107); Sahlins (2018).
- <sup>52</sup> Geertz (1974: 44).
- <sup>53</sup> Iqbal (1960 [1930]: 154).
- <sup>54</sup> Evans-Pritchard (1956: 322).
- <sup>55</sup> Asad (2003).

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