

# Theology and anthropology: can each help the other?

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## **Abstract**

Anthropology and theology are both academic disciplines, and both are under attack, along with the other humanities. Anthropology is also a science, of course, but in the present climate dominated by materialist scientism, that aspect is denied. Theologians must also marshal evidence that supports hypotheses, and demonstrate the logical coherence of arguments, although these requirements are derided by fundamentalists. Both anthropology and theology have the same subject of study, namely, human beings, and both struggle against powerful ideologies. Therefore, I argue, both disciplines can learn from each other and help in the struggle for the integrity of intellectual endeavor in both the sciences and the humanities. In particular, generative anthropology presents powerful hermeneutics in understanding human origins that are useful theologically as well, and theological methods can help interpret generative anthropology's "sense of the sacred."

**Keywords:** generative anthropology, theology, scientism, fundamentalism, human origins, faith, religion

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At first blush, my title may sound a bit ridiculous, wishful thinking for some, balderdash for others.[\[1\]](#) What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?[\[2\]](#)

For one thing, both study humans, which is a bit stranger than we usually realize: humans studying humans.[\[3\]](#) While anthropology clearly does—it's in the title of the discipline, after all—it may seem strange that theology is about the study of people too. But what are believers? That is what must be understood before thinking about what is believed. So all theologians, not just Christians, start with humans first, and only then try to think God.

It is clear that the present intellectual context is hard on both disciplines—we are actually in

the same boat, so to speak. Only fundamentalists think and act as if the interpretation of their sacred texts or doctrines is unchanging.[4] There is a parallel in scientism, that only that which is established by science narrowly defined can be true, and this flat materialist perspective reduces human being to no real importance—so why study it?

Therefore, scientism tends to dismiss anthropology. It turns out to be “just” humanities after all, for these ideologues. In other words, easily dismissed... And on the totem pole of the humanities, theology is at the very bottom. For both, there is the issue of (re)claiming legitimacy, and although the two disciplines are very different, the contemporary crisis of truth—whether there is any possibility of knowing what is true—is their common battleground.

Now let me define my terms. “Science” as say, physics, in a first instance gathers and measures physical data, seeks insight into them, formulates questions and then hypotheses; and in a second instance devises ways to verify a hypothesis and finally communicate the results as probably true or probably false. Call this type of *Wissenschaft* (“science” in German) *Naturwissenschaft* or natural science. There are sciences such as sociology that gathers and examines data about human societies, seeks insight into them, formulates questions and then hypotheses; and in a second instance devises ways to verify a hypothesis and finally communicate the results as probably true or probably false. Call it *Geisteswissenschaft*. [5]

Science as anthropology is sometimes *Natur* and sometimes *Geist* and often both, according to the current definition of the American Anthropological Association:

To understand the full sweep and complexity of cultures across all of human history, anthropology draws and builds upon knowledge from the social and biological sciences as well as the humanities and physical sciences. A central concern of anthropologists is the application of knowledge to the solution of human problems. Historically, anthropologists in the United States have been trained in one of four areas: sociocultural anthropology, biological/physical anthropology, archaeology, and linguistic anthropology. Anthropologists often integrate the perspectives of several of these areas into their research, teaching, and professional lives. [6]

“Religion” comes from Latin “binding together”: in terms of a person, religion poses questions of existence, and secondarily it is a cultural formulation created by a community. The German-American theologian Paul Tillich defined faith as a personal response to matters of “ultimate concern.” [7] These are in fact existential: does my life have a meaning, who am I and why, what is death in general and my death in particular, and so on. One’s primary reaction is thus highly intimate, and this questioning goes on throughout life. One may conclude that such questions are meaningless; or that they are irrelevant to me; or that I will think about them someday, perhaps after taking a class. There are as many possible

responses as there are people, and as we are never static so long as we are alive, change in our existential stance is inevitable.

Religion is a secondary, communal response to these ultimate concerns. This “answer”—codified in ritual, practices, liturgies, doctrines—is usually handed down to each member of the community from parents to children. No one escapes this formative indoctrination. It is part of the culture of one’s family, clan, tribe, nation, and it begins at birth. Obviously, one can reject at length the religion that came with mother’s milk, and perhaps some people should. Furthermore, this religious formation can very well be one of the several forms of atheism that not only rejects the accouterments of this or that religion, but that also possesses its own doctrines, social practices, and (informally at least) even rituals.<sup>[8]</sup>

Faith is the trusting response, a commitment, that one’s approach to handling ultimate concerns is right. But once expressed—conceptualized—as belief, no one can claim that it is certain for all people at all times in all places. Faith is at best an estimate of probability to which it is worth committing oneself, for neither one person nor all the faithful can prove it. In the final analysis, faith is more of a question than an answer. Belief is an answer that raises questions: where there is faith there must also be doubt.

This is the root of all theology, whose classic definition is *fides quærens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding.<sup>[9]</sup> I take this to mean for humanity in general and not just Christians. Some form of faith is present in each one of us.<sup>[10]</sup> We all have moments when we question this faith. To do so scientifically is the discipline of theology. It too “gathers and examines data, seeks insight into them, formulates questions and then hypotheses; and in a second instance devises ways to verify a hypothesis and finally communicate the results as probably true or probably false.” Like all sciences, theologies are judged by their internal coherence as well as their interpretation of the evidence they marshal. And like all sciences, theologies begin when people experience awe and wonder.

However, theology in general and Christian theology in particular is a different *Wissenschaft* than either natural or human sciences in one basic respect. The former begins from sense information; the latter adds human meanings to such information. Theology begins first not with data but with *dogmata*<sup>[11]</sup>. These are the givens, the mysteries of faith. In the face of the uneasiness the word “mystery” might cause, Flannery O’Connor gives a helpful word: “... a dogma is only a gateway to contemplation and is an instrument of freedom and not of restriction. It preserves mystery for the human mind.”<sup>[12]</sup> Doctrine, on the other hand, is a growing body of understandings, and these are the proper subject of theology as a science. Here hypotheses and probability hold just as much as for the other sciences.<sup>[13]</sup>

Furthermore, like anthropology, theology is a study of culture. “A theology mediates

between a cultural matrix and the role and significance of a religion in that matrix.”[14] While this definition has been hotly contested, its relevance to the task of theology remains. As such, it is also relevant to the development of the understanding of the “the full sweep and complexity of cultures across all of human history.”

Let us make a start with “what everyone calls ‘god’.”[15] The German theologian Karl Rahner pointed out that of the thousands of human languages, living or extinct, every single one has a word for “god.”[16] The anthropologist Eric Gans calls this phenomenon “the sense of the sacred,” which in his analysis is one of the four marks distinguishing humans *qua Homo sapiens* from other primates.[17]

Gans claims that this “sense of the sacred” is an essential aspect of human being, alone among all animals. His Generative Anthropology (hereafter GA) is a significant development of René Girard’s work on mimetic violence. In books like *The Scapegoat* and *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard focused on the communal phenomenon of scapegoating as a key to understanding basic issues concerning violence among human communities.

Gans posits a “minimal hypothesis,” in fact a heuristic, for the origin of the specifically human, as opposed to other primates. He describes the originary[18] moment of a community of proto-humans who are gathered around a fresh carcass. All members desire to eat of it, because they see others wanting to do the same—mimesis. The growth of mimetic desire among all of them increases the danger of violence. But instead of an alpha imposing a pecking order by violence, as none is strong enough to appropriate the meat alone, one member creates a *sign*, an “aborted gesture of appropriation.”

The sign is an object, a product, a whole imitating another whole [viz., appropriation]. The sign points to its referent, but in order to do so, it must be cut off from the possibility of attaining it, must mimic the object’s closure in its own. What is new about the human sign as opposed to the most complex animal signals is that it is the product of a formal consciousness. The sign is a form in that it turns back on itself in order not to appear to be pursued as a gesture of appropriation.[19]

As the members of the group reproduce the sign, the originary event becomes a *scene*, a re-enactment of the deferral of violence and survival of the community through the sign, which becomes a symbol. The scene has a center and a periphery, moving outward from the sacred to the profane.

What humanity has from the beginning designated as god is not the object that occupies the center of the circle but the Being of the center itself, which subsists after the destruction of its original inhabitant and whose will, conceived as the force that held the circle and its center in equilibrium at the moment of the emission of the sign, guarantees the sign’s timeless meaning...[20]

Comparing the GA heuristic to this discussion allows us to find a potential for “what everyone calls god” in concrete human experience and history. As an anthropological, i.e., scientific, tool, it does not depend upon acceptance of the existence of a deity at all, of course. However, the universal ritual reenactment of “originary scenes” noted by scholars such as Mircea Eliade[21] (as well as Girard) gives further grounding of a specifically non-theological basis for people seeking to understand how religions develop, and what that means in this or that instance.

This generic *fides* I have defined is not what Christians mean when we recite “We believe in one God.” At best it is a reaction to the mystery of human being in general and *le moi* in particular. Here is the first contribution of GA to theology. A clear and sharp distinction between faith and belief is crucial to theology’s work of understanding.[22] At the same time, it is also important for anthropologists studying religions.

GA provides for theology a scientific tool with this sense of the sacred. Although I am no anthropologist, I am struck by its ability to move from originary scenes to fertile interpretations of contemporary societies. In other words, GA’s heuristic competence in both understanding the data of humanity’s myriad creation myths and proposing a theory whose fruitfulness are its *lettres de noblesse*: it is a science of the human. As such, GA is not afraid of god-talk: as such, it is invaluable to theologians.

But it is *not* a theology, thank God. It should be clear that Gans’s theory is a heuristic and not a reference to any particular event. The work of theologians is to develop human understandings of mysteries believed to be divine.[23] At best, theology can never give us certitude, but only “that obscure, analogical and imperfect understanding that throws some light upon the truth *known from elsewhere* and enables us to possess it more fully.”[24] We cannot go beyond such understanding, and therefore our theologies will always be in need of revision and development as a result, even as they (hopefully) progress.

In this work GA is invaluable. At the same time, the creative new strategies that theologians are developing to address the general crisis of legitimate authorities can be helpful for anthropologists as well.[25]

One area of mutual concern is the origin of humans, *Homo sapiens*.

Since the theory of evolution is generally accepted by the vast majority of Christians, except for some inclined to imagining that the Bible is in fact a history written by God[26], and so build fantasies such as “creation parks.”[27] It is certainly true that churches have been obtuse at times, even to the point of seeking to kill,[28] the scientific method developed from (not rejecting) a basic theological truth: one learns nothing at all by saying that God “made it that way.” Whether god is or not, god is not a datum of the universe.[29] This is as much a scientific premise as it is theological.

The search for human origins is the proper of anthropology, though its tools have greatly expanded through genetic research as well as paleontology. The older linear scheme continues to develop evermore numerous branches. Yet the question remains: when did *Homo sapiens* become humans like us? Granted, put like that, it might seem like question-begging. Yet we want to know how and when humans began to use language as the historical record shows, how and when “we” began to make art, how and when did marriage develop not just as animal pair-bonding but as cultural symbols as well, and what is the origin and meaning of the “sense of the sacred”?

These questions are vital to theology as well. The second chapter of Genesis has an odd twist: God invites the *adam* (“groundling”)[30] to name—the specific power of language—all the animals, as part of a search of a “helper” for its loneliness. Prior to that, naming was only God’s power (Gen. 1:5, 8, 10), and it is hierarchical: *adam* names animals, God names *adam*.

Walker Percy reflected on the story of Helen Keller’s discovery of the name “water.” First, he quotes from Keller’s own *The Story of My Life*, when she understood the name “water”:

Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! [...] Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life.[31]

Percy continues:

... eight-year-old Helen made her breakthrough from the good responding animal which behaviorists study so successfully to the strange name-giving and sentence-uttering creature who begins by naming shoes and ships and sealing wax, and later tells jokes, curses, reads the paper, writes *La sua volontade e nostra pace*, or becomes a Hegel and composes an entire system of philosophy.[32]

Theologian Rowan Williams comments on 40,000-year-old Ice Age art, namely, certain “lion/man” statuettes: “lion’s heads and human bodies shaped in leonine form.”

The makers of such objects are engaged in a profoundly linguistic task: they are so depicting one thing that it “speak of” another, both blurring boundaries and sharpening distinctions ... thus indicating the presence of pre-frontal cortex activity in the brain. A characteristic intelligible form of life or action is identified and recognized at work in another living agent, and the representation creates a new hybrid material shape: this is a shape that describes nothing in the “real” world in the ordinary sense of description, but is not simply a casual *jeu d’esprit*...[33]

In other words, it is art, just like the magnificent cave paintings at Lascaux and in many other places.

I have written about marriage as symbolic pair-bonding in my 2016 book, *Made in Heaven: How God Acts in Marriage*,<sup>[34]</sup> relying on anthropological insights as well as theology *per se*. Besides Gans, I quoted Robin Fox's classic *Kinship and Marriage*:

Kinship and marriage are about the basic facts of life. They are about "birth and conception, and death," the eternal round that seemed to depress the poet but which excites, among others, the anthropologist.

[. . . ] Man is an animal, but he puts the basic facts of life to work for himself in ways that no other animal does or can.<sup>[35]</sup> (This last sentence sums up the subject shared by anthropology and theology.)

Finally, the sense of the sacred for theology is therefore what impels faith to attempt to explain what it cannot describe. Reflecting on this paradox calls forth questioning, as we seek insights into this phenomenon that is both individual and so, unique, and also shared in and by a community of worship through which faith comes.<sup>[36]</sup> For anthropology it is different, a heuristic that has nevertheless proven to be very fruitful indeed.

Faith is a trusting response to that which is "revealed" in the originary event. Since language is always communal, I learn a vocabulary developed by my "community of faith" to describe what I am feeling and why I should or should not trust it.<sup>[37]</sup> Doubt is always a reflection of faith: no one doubts what is certain. Atheists and agnostics are not exempt from this basic aspect of human being. We are all haunted, so to speak, by the originary event.

Such are some commonalities between anthropology and theology. In the present context of a flight from understanding into the hollow comfort of certainty, where seeking truth is derided as merely an occult power grab, or it is defined from sacred texts that brook no interpretation, both are sciences that have much to offer each other. Not only in the academy, but in practice as well.

We are all in the same boat, and it is taking on water fast. One can row, the other bail, and then trade places. But both need to get to shore.

## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> In an important new book, Derrick Peterson has deconstructed the "warfare" between science and religion that supposedly exists (and certainly sells popular books), as a story that never happened. He relies on massive efforts by historians of science over the past half-century, as well as his own research, to tell a radically different story: "While

deconstructing many of the historical misunderstand[ings] that have gone into the thesis and continue to linger in our consciousness does not solve all our problems, or prove Christianity true, or that God is real, it does help us precisely by clearing the decks. While the rhetoric of ‘everything we know is wrong’ can be quite trying when used as marketing, often in the areas of the history of science and religion one does truly wish we could all start over.” *Flat Earths and Fake Footnotes: The Strange Tale of How the Conflict Between Science and Christianity Was Written into History* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), 316.

[2] Reversing the third-century theologian Tertullian’s famous line, “What then has Athens in common with Jerusalem ? What has the Academy in common with the Church ?” [http://www.tertullian.org/articles/bindley\\_test/bindley\\_test\\_07prae.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/articles/bindley_test/bindley_test_07prae.htm)

[3] Neuroscientists studying the brain are nothing else than brains studying brains, for example.

[4] An analogy would be the “originalist” jurists who believe the US Constitution can only be interpreted in its original meaning and context. Like modern religious fundamentalism, this notion is of fairly recent origin. It is false because it is unhistorical. The Constitution originated from the deliberations of a group of propertied white men, half of whom were slaveowners. Even if we could have direct access to their mindset, it would be of no help in addressing contemporary issues of American jurisprudence.

[5] This classic distinction comes from Franz Boas, “The Study of Geography” *Science* 11 Feb 1887: Vol. ns-9, Issue 210S, 137-141.

[6] See <https://www.americananthro.org>.

[7] A helpful compendium of his thought is Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (HarperOne, 2017). He expanded on its themes in his three-volume *Systematic Theology*.

[8] See John Grey, *Seven Types of Atheism* (London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018). Conversely, there are religions without rituals.

[9] Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, 1.

[10] .« On est contraint à la foi. Croire de force, tel est le résultat. Mais avoir foi ne suffit pas pour être tranquille. La foi a on ne sait quel bizarre besoin de forme. De là les religions. Rien n’est accablant comme une croyance sans contour. » Victor Hugo, *Les travailleurs de la mer*, vol. 2, p.111.

[11] The word “dogma” comes from the Greek δοκεῖν (*dokein*), meaning to believe, to hold an opinion. It has taken on the pejorative meaning of something to be believed without question, imposed by a religious or ideological authority, e.g., “Marxist dogma.” Thus

dogma connotes something irrational. However, its precise meaning in Christian discourse is those truths that can only be known through divine revelation, “the mysteries of the faith”.

[12] Flannery O’Connor in a letter to “A”, in *The Habit of Being* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 92. “A” has recently been identified as [Hazel “Betty” Hester](#).

[13] Bernard Lonergan, *The Triune God: Systematics* tr. Michael Shields (Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, Vol. 12, University of Toronto Press, 2007), 31-51.

[14] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, Vol. 14, University of Toronto Press, 2017), 3. This definition is controversial because it is generic, and deliberately, not specifically Christian. In fact, Lonergan proposes a “generalized empirical method” which moves in eight “functions” from first, research, to finally, communications, in a heuristic that relies upon an adaptation of scientific method for any community of thinkers. As such it is applicable to all scholars, scientific or otherwise.

[15] “*quod omnes dicunt Deum*”—Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologicæ* I.q.2.a.3.

[16] See *The Content of Faith: The Best of Karl Rahner’s Theological Writings*, eds. Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt, trans. by Harvey D. Egan, S.J. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1992), 205-211; 205. A classic restatement of the ubiquity of the notion of god is John Calvin: “Yet there is, as the eminent pagan says, no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep-seated conviction that there is a god.” (*Institutes of Religion*, I.3.1.) The “pagan” is of course Cicero. See *inter alia*, *Tusculan Disputations*, I.13.30.

[17] The others are highly developed symbolic language, the creation of art, and the practice of marriage as culturally defined symbolic pair-bonding. See *A New Way of Thinking: Generative Anthropology in Religion, Philosophy, Art* (Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group, 2011).

[18] *Originary* not *original*. The distinction is crucial.

[19] *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 30.

[20] *The Scenic Imagination: Originary Thinking from Hobbes to the Present Day* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 3

[21] *Le sacré et le profane* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987).

[22] As it is for analytic epistemologists who mistakenly seek grounds for “justified true

belief”, or else reject its possibility, missing the point completely. See *inter alia*, Laurent Jodoin, “[The Wars on Truth](#)”.

[23] This is not strictly true of Buddhism, of course, but it holds for Buddhist theologians to develop understandings of their religion’s tenets.

[24] Lonergan, *Systematics*, 107. Emphasis added.

[25] See, e.g., Jeremy Wilkins, *Before Truth* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2018), 31-51.

[26] As opposed to “inspired”—literally, “God-breathed”—a radical difference between a book written by “God’s finger” instead of by human authors. See II Timothy 3:16.

[27] See e.g., the [Creation Museum](#).

[28] The Inquisition was originally a pastoral process, to help people refine their understanding of the faith. It became murderous only when the monarchs of Spain “weaponized” it for their political purposes: thus the “Spanish” Inquisition. Another argument for separation of church and state...

[29] Otherwise the god·dess is merely a very powerful alien, i.e., not divine. This is why I welcome satires like “[The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster](#)”, to remind first of all believers of this basic truth. It is also why I think process theologies are mistaken at their root. For a succinct argument, see David Burrell, “[Does process theology rest on a mistake?](#)” *Theological Studies* 43, no. 1 (March 1982): 125-35.

[30] From Hebrew *adamah*, meaning “earth”, that from which in Genesis 2 God formed the *adam*. It only found its loneliness resolved when God “sexed” it into male and female. And see Gans’ [analysis](#) of Eve’s *ressentiment*...

[31] Quoted in “The Delta Factor”, *The Message in the Bottle* ( ), 34-35.

[32] *Ibid.*

[33] Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 25-6; he references Jill Cook, *Ice Age Art: Arrival of the Modern Mind* (London: British Museum Press, 2013), 28-37. She suggests that such complex symbolization indicates a “modern mind”; Williams opines that it rather indicates “human intellection as such.”

[34] Fall River, MA: [Theology for Everybody Books](#) (reviewed by Eric Gans [here](#)).

[35] Robin Fox, *Kinship and Marriage* (Cambridge, England, 1967; Cambridge University Press), 27; *Made in Heaven*, 12.

[36] See, for instance, “Hindu and Christian *Bhakti*: A Common Human Response to the Sacred”, David C. Scott, [Indian Journal of Theology, 29\(1\),1980](#): 12-32

[37] One great mistake of our time that that first we have a “religious experience” and then we individually search out a community of faith that best expresses that experience, and this applies equally to atheists as to theists. This stunted notion informs the idea that parents should not raise their children in the same faith tradition as themselves so they can find their “own” religion. The upshot is not that the young become sophisticated as they grow into adulthood, but rather that they are completely unprepared for the basic questions of life, and so are more liable to be recruited into sects.