

mensely in creating graphs, charts, and other editorial work. Muchas gracias. We are grateful to Wheaton College for providing me (Brian) the sabbatical time to work on a project such as this. We're thankful for Kim Phipps and Sue Hasseler at Messiah College, both of whom supported me (Jenell) and this project in practical ways, including course release time. I (Jenell) also thank the Pinklings, my writing group, for support and critique.

We are both grateful to our families, as well.

Brian: Marissa, thank you for your unflagging support. A shout-out to Hannah (14), Sam (10), and Ben (7), who actually saw a bit more of me during sabbatical even though I was sometimes distracted by projects such as this one. Thank you for not letting me become too distracted.

Jenell: James, thank you for believing in me as an anthropologist and as a writer. Wesley (4), Oliver (4), and Maxwell (3), thank you for believing in me as a mother. Someday (after you learn to read!) I hope you'll enjoy your mother's writings.

The Discipline of Anthropology

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Describe the four fields of anthropology and explain how they relate to one another.
2. Articulate the methods and concepts that distinguish cultural anthropology from related disciplines such as sociology.
3. Explain how Christians have contributed to the discipline of anthropology as well as how anthropology can contribute to specifically Christian work such as missions.

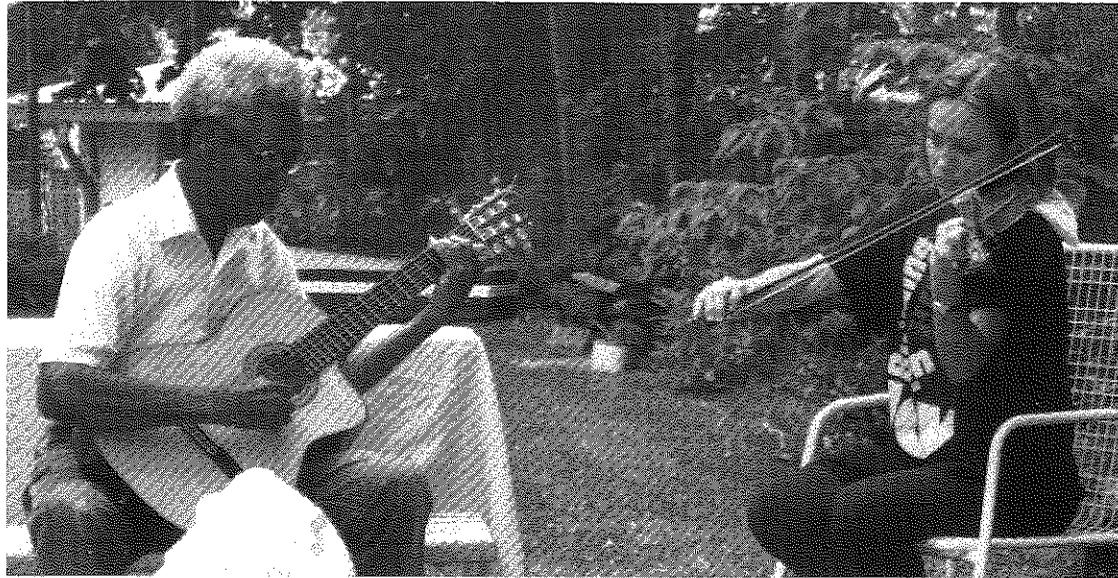
Finding Cultural Anthropology

Jenell's Journey

After a summer of urban ministry in Philadelphia, I returned to my suburban Christian college in Minnesota and searched the academic catalog for classes related to race, poverty, and cities. The Department of Anthropology and Sociology offered the most classes related to my emerging areas of passion, so I signed up as a major. Later, after I spent a month in Amsterdam, Holland, in a college class doing anthropological research about church planting for Youth With a Mission, I decided to become an anthropologist.

Chapter Outline

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 - Brian's journey
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- Anthropology and Sociology
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- Anthropology and Missions
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- Anthropology and the Global Church

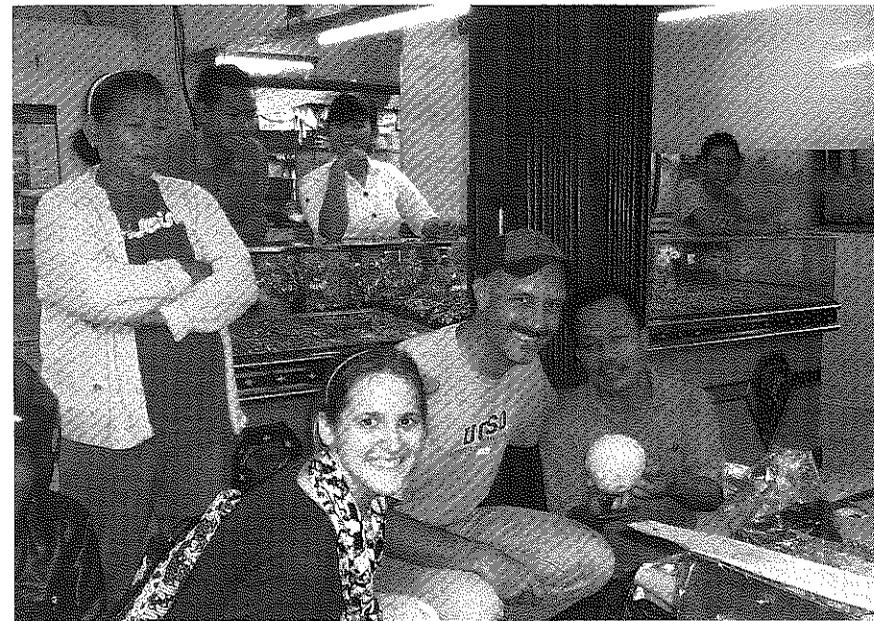


Jenell socializes with a key informant at a neighborhood gathering.

For me, anthropology has always been intertwined with urban life and ministry. My doctoral fieldwork involved four years of life, ministry, and research in a neighborhood in the northwest quadrant of Washington, D.C. From my bedroom window I could see the U.S. Capitol, as well as the profound poverty and racial segregation that exist just blocks from that global symbol of freedom and democracy. My research question was about ghetto formation and resident activism—how urban spaces become racially homogeneous and economically disadvantaged, and how residents work for neighborhood betterment. My research was motivated by faith—specifically by the question, “Who is my neighbor?” I hoped the research itself would be an act of neighborliness, telling the story of a neighborhood from residents’ perspectives. My participant observation included being an involved citizen and church member while living at Esther House, a Christian community house of women committed to neighborhood betterment. I came to see that the methodology of anthropology—living among people and listening to their stories—could be a Christian practice.

Brian’s Journey

I got my first taste of anthropology when I was developing an undergraduate thesis project at my New England college in a program that combined government, economics, history, and social theory. I decided to do research on missions in the Philippines, since both my best friend and my girlfriend (now wife) had Philippine ancestry. I had not taken a single course in anthropology, but I knew I wanted to travel and could not see myself working in an



Brian and a student pose with Parno, a coconut seller in Puncak, Indonesia.

archive; I wanted to talk with actual people. With my background in social science and a lot of enthusiasm, I spent a summer doing fieldwork in a small mountain village in the northern Philippines, interviewing people and learning about the process of social change following the widespread conversion to Christianity some thirty years earlier. Writing my thesis was the first time in my secular education that I really connected the social, theological, and cultural aspects of Christianity.

I wanted to continue the research in graduate school, but did not know which discipline would work best. I considered history and political science, but neither discipline seemed a good fit. At the time, I lived near Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California, where I found anthropologists in the school of intercultural studies. After a few trial classes, I realized that cultural anthropology would allow me to consider all the aspects of life I found interesting. My research was also motivated by my faith as I sought to bring to the wider academic world an understanding of Christianity that is scholarly and critical but not hostile to Christians. During my fieldwork, I taught courses at the Philippine seminary where my family and I lived. There I came to see anthropology as a vital mode of thought for the church as well as the world.

Eventually we met each other in the relatively small world of Christian cultural anthropologists. After years of talking at conferences and even working

on a colleague's book project together, we became convinced that anthropology had many important insights for Christians.¹ Drawing from nearly twenty combined years of teaching Introduction to Anthropology in Christian college and seminary classrooms, and many other courses as well, we have put together our knowledge of the discipline with our understanding of the particular questions and emphases Christians often bring. Thus, in addition to presenting the discipline of cultural anthropology generally, this text addresses distinctively Christian concerns, acknowledging points of tension and highlighting ways in which the discipline of anthropology can contribute to the work of Christians and the church.

What Is Cultural Anthropology?

On the first day of class, we often ask our students, "When you tell people you're taking a cultural anthropology class, what do they think you're studying?" The answers range from the study of dinosaurs, to images of Indiana Jones hunting down priceless (and magical) artifacts, to radical cultural relativists who think there is no truth. The first of these guesses is understandable, but wrong; the second is flattering, but not a very realistic portrayal of a different branch of anthropology; the third gets to a bit of truth, although as we discuss in chapter 2, this unfortunate characterization comes from particular anthropologists rather than from the discipline itself.

The truth is that *cultural anthropology* is the description, interpretation, and analysis of similarities and differences in human cultures. It is a diverse discipline encompassing a wide variety of topics related to human beings. Cultural anthropologists often differentiate themselves by referring to areas of interest and expertise such as economic anthropology, urban anthropology, or anthropology of religion, to name just a few.

As the personal stories at the beginning of this chapter demonstrate, anthropologists come to the discipline in a variety of ways and study an array of topics, but they share a commitment to a common perspective and method. The *anthropological perspective* refers to an approach to social research that seeks to understand culture from the point of view of the people *within* that cultural context. *Ethnographic fieldwork* is anthropology's hallmark research method, based upon the anthropologist's direct experience in a culture.

What often draws Christians to the discipline is the realization that the anthropological perspective and method enable us to serve the world by better understanding it. For me (Jenell), that has included urban ministry and

1. Robert Priest and Alvaro Nieves, eds., *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

community development, as well as college teaching. For me (Brian), anthropology has shaped my ability to teach and write about global Christianity, short-term mission, and church organization. Many Christians find a career in anthropology studying topics that have little obvious relationship to their faith, even while the calling to do research and scholarship provides an opportunity for faithfully using the gifts God has given them. Ultimately, most anthropology students do not become professional anthropologists, yet all Christians can benefit from understanding the methods and concepts of the discipline and connecting anthropology to matters of evangelism, social action, theology, church life, and the role of culture in our own understanding of the gospel.

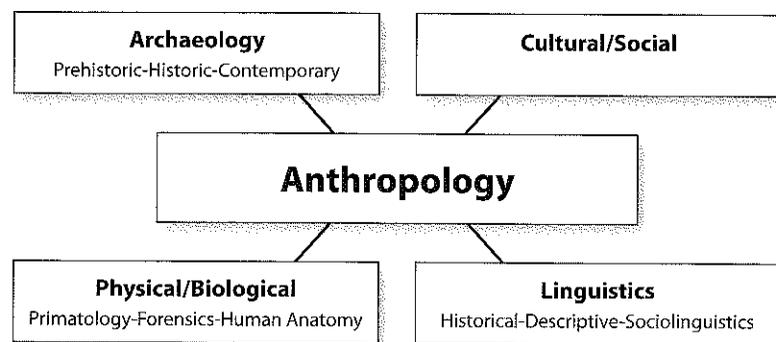
In this chapter we present an outline of the four branches, or subfields, of anthropology. We then elaborate on the branch that is the focus of this text, cultural anthropology, giving an overview of its distinctive methods and concepts and distinguishing it from other social sciences. Finally, we discuss the contributions an anthropological understanding can provide Christians in our efforts to live faithful lives as members of the local and global body of Christ.

The Four Subfields of Anthropology

Simply breaking down the word "anthropology" into its parts reveals the breadth of the discipline. *Anthro* comes from the Greek *anthropos*, meaning "human," and *-ology* from *logos*, or "study." The term *anthropology* is extraordinarily broad because the discipline as a whole encompasses several distinct but related modes of research. Anthropology has traditionally been divided into four subfields: archaeology, linguistics, physical or biological anthropology, and cultural or social anthropology.² The four subfields are very different from one another in method and theory, yet all share the anthropological perspective on human life and culture. Today some add a fifth branch of anthropology—*applied anthropology*—in which practitioners use anthropology in the service of particular social concerns. Others argue that applied anthropology is not a subfield because application is an integral part of each subfield, and because applied anthropologists usually earned their degrees in one of the traditional four subfields. In this text, we discuss applied anthropology as it occurs in each of the traditional four subfields and do not categorize applied anthropology as a fifth subfield.

2. As explained later in the chapter, the terms *social* and *cultural* anthropology refer to British and American emphases. Today, the terms are virtually interchangeable, with some graduate programs using the term "sociocultural" to avoid the distinction. We will use the term "cultural" throughout the chapter to refer to this fourth branch of anthropology.

Fig. 1.1 The Four Subfields of Anthropology



Archaeology

Archaeology is the study of material artifacts to understand a people's culture or society. This could be the people of the ancient past understood through the simple stone tools or fire pits they left behind, or it could be the relatively recent past of the last century or even contemporary communities. Archaeologists have studied everything from the Underground Railroad by which enslaved people in the southern United States escaped to the North, to Mayan empires in Central America, to the historicity of biblical narratives, to consumption patterns of Americans based on their garbage.

The primary data collection method of archaeologists is *excavation*, a rigorous method of extracting artifacts from underground, though they may also study visible structures such as pyramids, footprints fossilized into rocks, or cave paintings. By interpreting artifacts, archaeologists are able to draw conclusions about how the people connected to those artifacts lived. For example, before Europeans arrived in what is now North America, a civilization known to us only as the *Mound Builders* constructed massive mounds in various places throughout the Great Plains and southeastern United States. Archaeologists digging into these mounds and analyzing bits of pottery, metal, animal bones, microscopic pollen, and the composition of the soil have been able to posit social hierarchies, trade relationships, patterns of settlement, daily diet, religious beliefs, and a great deal more. All of this comes only from the material remains; the Mound Builders left no written accounts of their lives.

Archaeologists may combine the analysis of material life with information taken from contemporary populations, a form of study known as *ethnoarchaeology*. Comparing the past (as seen in a material record) to the present (understood through the ethnographic methods described below) provides information about cultural change even when no written records of the past exist. Similarly, archaeologists have used artifacts to gain information about

contemporary populations that is not easily accessible through ethnographic or other interactive methods.

One famous project by William Rathje involved the study of garbage in the midsized Arizona city of Tucson.³ Rathje and his team gained permission to go through the city's garbage, comparing what they found with what people said about their own patterns of consumption and disposal in surveys and interviews. Due to the preservative qualities of landfills, they were even able to go back decades, finding perfectly preserved papers from the 1950s and earlier. What they learned was that surveys—like the people who answer them—are not always as reliable as the archaeological record. When asked how much beer they drank per week, or how much food they threw away, respondents often gave answers that differed greatly from the material data. Rathje disseminates his findings in scholarly venues for archaeologists, and also writes for the public in ways that heighten people's awareness of their consumption and disposal habits. Archaeology is a nonreactive measure of human behavior, meaning it does not cause subjects to change behavior in response to the research. Thus, archaeology provides another means of understanding culture that is an important part of the discipline.

Linguistics

A second subfield of anthropology, *linguistics*, involves the study of language. In some universities, it remains a distinct field of study, particularly where language is studied primarily as a system of sounds and rules. Where language is studied primarily in relation to its use within larger cultural and social systems, it is known as sociolinguistics and is integrated with the study of cultural anthropology. William Leap is a sociolinguist who studied how language was used by both teachers and students in schools on the Ute Reservation in Utah. Conflicts between standard English-speaking teachers and students who spoke both Ute and a Ute-specific dialect of English could be understood and sometimes resolved by highlighting the power dynamics present in both verbal and nonverbal language.⁴

Many Christians have heard of linguistics through the work of Wycliffe Bible Translators and its academic sister organization, SIL International, formerly known as the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Wycliffe and SIL International deploy hundreds of linguists and anthropologists to translate the Bible into the thousands of languages around the world. Some do technical linguistic analysis, creating systems of writing and codifying the grammar of oral languages. Others engage directly with sociolinguistics, working out

3. William Rathje, *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

4. William Leap, *American Indian English* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993).

Christianity, Science, and Evolution: Francis Collins and the Human Genome Project

Francis S. Collins (b. 1950) was professor of internal medicine and human genetics when he was appointed to lead the Human Genome Project in 1993. This multibillion-dollar project brought together the world's top scientists to map the human genome. With the potential to discover genetic causes and cures for hundreds of genetically rooted diseases, it was an enormous honor and a testimony to the high stature Collins had among his peers.

Collins committed his life to Christ after earning a PhD in chemistry from Yale and an MD from the University of North Carolina. Although his work as a geneticist was built on the theory of evolution and genetic relatedness, Collins never felt there was a conflict between his work as a scientist and his Christian faith. In 2006 he published *The Language of God: A Scientist*

Presents Evidence for Belief, in which he proposed the idea of BioLogos, arguing that all natural processes, including evolution, are an expression of God's character and will.¹

Collins has become a very public witness for faith in the scientific community, although biblical scholars hold various opinions about his theology. Bringing the Human Genome Project to completion ahead of schedule and under budget, Collins resigned his leadership in 2008. In 2009, he was appointed as the head of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), where he oversees a multibillion-dollar research budget and serves in one of the most strategic scientific organizations in the world.

1. Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: The Free Press, 2006).

the proper metaphors, concepts, images, and poetics of the target language in order to faithfully translate Hebrew and Greek Scriptures into a new linguistic context.

Today sociolinguistics is often considered a part of cultural anthropology, since both subfields focus on the study of meaning and culture. Linguistics, and anthropological approaches to language in general, are significant for the study of culture and society. We devote an entire chapter to it (see chap. 3).

Physical/biological anthropology

Physical or biological anthropology involves the study of human anatomy, nonhuman primates (*primatology*), and human origins. Physical anthropology as connected to archaeology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology illuminates how the study of physical qualities relates to the ways humans organize social life. Physical anthropologists often employ their expertise in medical schools, teaching courses in gross anatomy and embryology. Physical anthropologists may apply their work to medical care, using comparisons of human growth patterns to understand nutrition and physical variation within a community and to otherwise aid medical practitioners in providing good care.⁵ Forensic anthropology is a rapidly growing applied branch of physical

5. For an example of this application of physical anthropology to medical and cultural concerns and nutrition, see Katherine Dettwyler, *Dancing Skeletons: Life and Death in West Africa* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1993).

anthropology in which anthropologists interpret human remains, usually for legal purposes. Clea Koff is a forensic anthropologist who exhumed remains from sites of mass killings in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.⁶ Her work contributed to legal processes and to healing for survivors who were finally able to identify the deceased.

Physical anthropology is, for many Christians, the most controversial subfield of anthropology. For Christians, Jews, Muslims, and other religious people who believe God created the world, the scientific study of human origins often raises difficult issues. For many Christians, their interpretation of Genesis precludes the idea that humans are descended from other life-forms. Others point to Romans 5:12, where Paul speaks of sin entering the world through "one man," meaning Adam must have been created separately from other animals. Even the idea of God selecting preexisting hominids in order to create God's image in them strikes many Christians as incompatible with scriptural accounts.

Other Christians believe that Genesis teaches theological truth but that it does not provide scientific or historical accounts of creation. These Christians, including biblical scholars and theologians, as well as scientists and other scholars, believe the questions addressed by evolutionary theory are distinct from those answered by Genesis.⁷ Today some Christians find their calling by working in areas of physical anthropology and primatology. They feel they can accept the mechanism of evolution as God's means of creating the world without compromising the authority of Scripture.

Understanding the relationship of creation to human development involves many fields of study, including theology, biblical exegesis, hermeneutics, geology, cosmology, genetics, and paleontology, as well as anthropology. Many excellent treatments of these issues from a variety of perspectives can address specific questions in much more depth than we can undertake here.⁸ For this book, with a focus on cultural anthropology, it is not necessary to settle these questions in order to understand how physical/biological anthropology fits within anthropology generally. Nor should questions about evolutionary theory be an insurmountable barrier for Christians to fully engage the discipline of cultural anthropology.

Cultural anthropology

The fourth subfield, and the focus of this text, is cultural anthropology. Many people in the United States have never heard of anthropology or have

6. Clea Koff, *The Bone Woman: A Forensic Anthropologist's Search for Truth in the Mass Graves of Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo* (New York: Random House, 2005).

7. See Dorothy Chappell and David E. Cook, *Not Just Science: Questions Where Christian Faith and Natural Science Intersect* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

8. See, for instance, *ibid.*

only a vague notion of what it is. However, most of the topics and methods of cultural anthropology are ones that people find immediately interesting and may have encountered in other ways.

Cultural anthropology began from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reports from missionaries and colonialists about the unfamiliar people and customs they encountered in their travels. Studying anthropology, even today, remains a form of scholarly travel through which people encounter the lives of others. Anyone who enjoyed reading about people around the world in high school social studies, or dreamed of traveling to faraway places in order to learn about how people live, has taken a step toward cultural anthropology.

Several disciplines involve detailed understandings of social organization and cultural difference, of course, including history, geography, and sociology. While the differences between those disciplines and anthropology will become clearer throughout the text (see below for a contrast between cultural anthropology and sociology), one of the most distinctive features of cultural anthropology is the primary method anthropologists use in their research: ethnographic fieldwork.

Ethnography and Fieldwork

Ethnography [*ethno* = people, *graphy* = writing] refers to both the activity and the product of cultural anthropology. Cultural anthropologists engage in ethnography by studying multiple aspects of life in a particular place or among a group of people to create a picture of how those people understand and live in the world. Anthropologists write up their research in accounts called *ethnographies*, rich descriptions and analyses that include the anthropologists' experiences of "being there." It is often said that "being there" is the ethnographic standard for legitimate anthropological knowledge.

When Elliot Liebow was preparing for fieldwork among urban African Americans in the United States, his supervisor said, "Go out there and make like an anthropologist." Anthropologists have made a career out of hanging out. In fact, ethnographic research consists of living in a way that allows the anthropologist to become as integrated into daily life as possible. Even when fieldwork appears to be just hanging out, as Liebow did for months on Washington, D.C., street corners, the anthropologist is always purposeful, observing and participating with care and taking notes (either on the spot or later) that will be used for analysis.⁹

Emerging in the early twentieth century, the importance of long-term fieldwork reflected the belief that understanding complex social and cultural life

9. Elliot Liebow, *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

necessarily involves observing and interacting with people as they go about their daily lives, and that this goal takes a long time to reach. Anthropologists often spend one to two years in the field, sometimes making repeated field trips over the course of their careers to correct errors, observe changes over time, and pursue new areas of interest. Unlike earlier scholars who relied on secondhand information or direct interviews with individuals outside their own social context (see chap. 2), anthropologists became committed to the notion that research on culturally identifiable groups required that the anthropologist learn the languages and customs of people he or she wished to understand and spend significant time observing daily life as well as events of special social significance.

Participant observation is the primary method associated with ethnographic research. Picture a continuum with full participation at one end and detached observation at the other. *Participant observation* involves moving around on the continuum throughout fieldwork; it is an approach to research that combines participation and observation in various ways to optimize understanding of the culture being studied. Standing back and taking a good look around is often the way an anthropologist begins, and detached observation yields good insight. But simultaneously and self-consciously, the anthropologist moves toward participation.

For me (Jenell), participant observation meant living, worshiping, socializing, and even holding my wedding in a low-income African American neighborhood of Washington, D.C. At times, I stood back and observed—for instance, at a heated meeting of community activists when I didn't yet understand the issues at hand. At other times I fully participated—having my say at community meetings, hosting community gatherings at my home, and joining a local church. Though people knew I was doing research, as I engaged in the daily activities of life, they came to trust and understand me even as I understood them.

In my research on congregations in the Philippines, I (Brian) spent eighteen months participating in three congregations.¹⁰ Having graduated from a seminary and being in a place where relatively few people were able to earn such advanced degrees, I was frequently invited to preach and lead Bible studies in congregations. Participating in this way gave me a role and position that people could understand more easily than "anthropologist." More importantly, sharing my faith and contributing to Christian life in these ways created *rapport*, a relationship of conversational ease with individuals and groups. For all of us, good *rapport* allowed us to talk more honestly and intimately about our lives and perspectives on issues of culture, faith, community, and context.

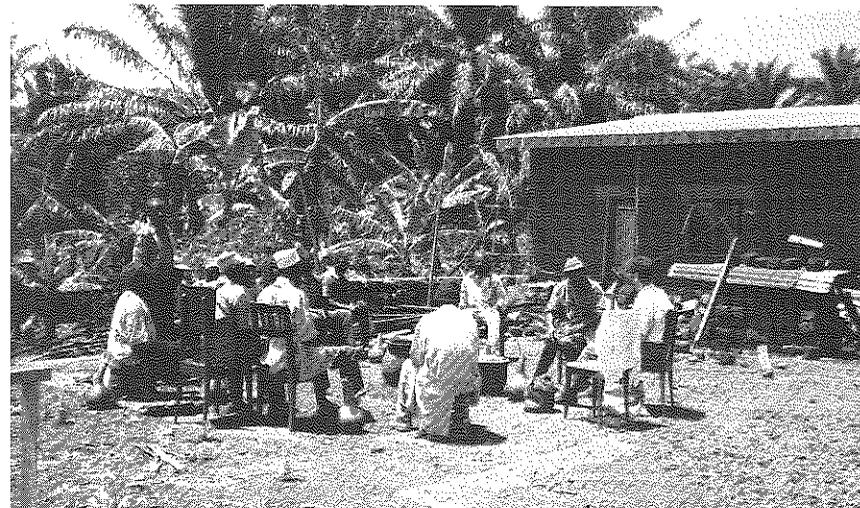
10. See Brian Howell, *Christianity in the Local Context: Southern Baptists in the Philippines* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

For some anthropologists, participant observation may take the form of holding a job in the organization being studied, taking on an official leadership position, or even adopting a role that makes them appear to be a typical member of the community. Adopting multiple roles can be difficult since anthropologists in the United States embrace the American Anthropological Association's code of ethics, which does not allow researchers to misrepresent themselves or trick people into participating in research.¹¹ Yet even when anthropologists are forthcoming about their identity and research interests, it is still possible for them to become part of a community and for people to get used to the presence of an outsider. In some cases, particularly when anthropologists do not stand out in some obvious way, they can become insiders of a sort. They can occupy a place in the daily routines of life in the community they have come to study. It is through these everyday interactions that anthropologists gain insights into culture and social life.

Within the general method of participant observation, anthropologists employ a variety of techniques for obtaining information and increasing their understanding. *Ethnographic interviews* involve purposeful, documented conversation with research participants. They may be formal, including recording an interview based on a list of questions, or very informal, with questions generated on the spot and note-taking done later. Anthropologists may conduct *focus groups*, a type of interview in which small groups of people are asked to discuss a particular topic while the anthropologist takes notes. Other methods that complement participant observation include *mapping* (diagramming geographical space or human interpretation and use of space), recording a *life history* (an interview or series of interviews that document the trajectory of a single life), and conducting a *survey* (a standardized set of questions applied to numerous individuals or places).

These methods, as well as participant observation, are increasingly used in short-term research projects. Long-term fieldwork requires great personal and financial commitment, and many researchers wish to glean as much benefit as possible from ethnography even when they don't have time or funding for years in the field. A recent development in research methodology that makes the benefits of the anthropological approach more accessible to more people is *rapid ethnographic assessment procedures* (REAP), or the time-compressed use of focus groups, ethnographic interviews, mapping, and other methods within a framework of participant observation. REAP projects can occur over a period of weeks, days, or even hours. REAP researchers must always account for ways in which the short-term nature of the research limits the validity of findings, as well as ways in which ethnographic methods enhance

11. The American Anthropological Association's code of ethics can be found at www.aaanet.org/issues/policy-advocacy/Code-of-Ethics.cfm.



Anthropologist Michael Jindra (in baseball cap) discussing "death celebrations" with a group of village elders in Njindom, Cameroon.
Photo: Michael Jindra

their findings beyond what a simple questionnaire or detached observation could yield.

Participant observation and its related methods highlight the extent to which cultural anthropology focuses on small-scale cases—villages, clubs, neighborhoods, congregations, families. The anthropologist draws on many aspects of life to create a holistic understanding of the situation. A *holistic understanding* assumes that all parts of human life—from birthing practices to the economy to warfare to art—are interconnected. From that very local and specific perspective, the anthropologist then discusses how the processes, features, and particularities of the case reveal something about human life more generally.

The Anthropological Perspective

Anthropologists believe that culture is a part of everything human beings do and think, often in ways hidden from those immersed in it. The anthropological perspective, as we stated earlier, refers to the attempt by the anthropologist to explain a cultural context from the *inside*, understanding the motives, actions, and beliefs of others in their own terms. This does not mean anthropologists are trying to become different kinds of people, to "go native" and be completely submerged in a new culture. Rather, it means they learn the context and culture to the point that they can explain how the people of a particular culture or context understand the world, and how diverse aspects of their lives come together. The methodology of long-term fieldwork is designed to allow the anthropologist to understand this complexity by spending enough time among a people to not only observe what they do but to understand why they

do it. The central concept of culture (defined in detail in the next chapter) connects every aspect of human life, from the way people raise children, to how they dress, to how they classify the colors they see. Rather than isolating particular features of social life, such as political institutions or economic decision making, anthropologists seek to understand how these interrelated aspects of life function in shaping how people live; how those people *think* about those features; how they relate to the other aspects of human life found in community. Margaret Mead (1901–78), an anthropologist who became a major public figure of the twentieth century, once said, “The world is my field—it’s all anthropology.”¹²

It is in understanding those different from ourselves—the *Cultural Other*—that cultural anthropologists believe we can best understand ourselves. When we realize that many things we take for granted other people construe quite differently—such as what makes a person beautiful, or how many colors there are—we can more easily examine our own culture. Christians, in particular, may find this helpful as we explore our own cultural assumptions that may help or hinder a faithful walk with Christ.

Anthropology and Sociology

Because cultural anthropology draws together history, economics, politics, religion, family, and psychology to understand people’s social and cultural lives, it overlaps with several disciplines, but none more than sociology. The simple answer to the question, “What’s the difference between sociology and anthropology?” is that historically, sociologists have focused mainly on Western societies and used *quantitative research methods*: that is, measurement-based approaches that rely on mathematics, statistics, and hypotheses for producing and interpreting data. Anthropologists more often turned to small communities outside the West and used qualitative methods to develop holistic portraits of cultural life. *Qualitative research methods* are interpretive approaches that use participant observation, interviews, document analysis, and other methods to understand the nature and meaning of phenomena. In the contemporary world, many sociologists and anthropologists use mixed-method approaches that strategically rely on both quantitative and qualitative methods to best explore a research question.

Sociology and anthropology have a number of other distinctive features as well. Anthropologists are more likely to study cross-culturally than sociologists. Even when studying their own culture, anthropologists compare their findings cross-culturally and employ concepts built from the ongoing comparison of cultural differences. Anthropologists are more committed to the

12. Winthrop Sargeant, “It’s All Anthropology,” *New Yorker*, December 30, 1961, 31.

use of culture as a central concept to any analysis, while sociologists are more likely to use society and institutions (see chaps. 2 and 4) as the key organizing ideas. Christians can rely on anthropology more to understand mission and the relationship between gospel and culture, at home and abroad. Sociology proves more useful for Christians seeking a big-picture view of religion and social life on a national or regional scale.

In U.S. universities and colleges, sociology and anthropology are sometimes blended in an academic department, or sociologists may teach an introductory class in cultural anthropology. Because both disciplines explore social life, cultural diversity, and group behavior, this compatibility makes good sense. Historically, the two disciplines come from some of the same philosophers and social theorists who began thinking about rapid changes in European life in the eighteenth century and the increasingly apparent differences found among people around the world (see chap. 11).

In the end, what makes anthropology distinct from all social sciences is anthropology’s focus on the Other. As historian of anthropology William Y. Adams has written, “After more than a century of existence, anthropology has only just begun to understand its proper role among the social sciences. It is, we now recognize, the systematic study of the Other, whereas all of the other social disciplines are, in one sense or another, studies of the Self.”¹³

Anthropology and the Christian Witness

In the first one hundred years of the discipline, anthropologists and Christians not only worked well together; they were often one and the same. Early anthropologists such as Maurice Leenhardt (1878–1945) conducted anthropological research in conjunction with missionary work.¹⁴ After spending twenty-four years in New Caledonia as a Protestant missionary, Leenhardt took over the prestigious chair in social anthropology at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*, a leading French university, where he taught what he had learned during his missionary travels. Later missionary anthropologists and linguists made significant contributions to the discipline from work that flowed directly from their Christian work in Bible translation and evangelism, even establishing scholarly journals such as *Anthropos* and *Missiology* (formerly known as *Practical Anthropology*) with the express purpose of bringing together anthropology and missiology.

The relationship between Christianity and anthropology has not always been smooth and harmonious. Anthropologists working in various parts of

13. William Y. Adams, *The Philosophical Roots of Anthropology* (Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 1998), 1.

14. See James Clifford, *Person and Myth: Maurice Leenhardt in the Melanesian World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992).

the world have documented both the inadvertent and conscious cooperation of missionaries with colonial rulers, in which mission work became part of a “civilizing” and subjugating process. Christians, including Christian anthropologists, have pointed out secular assumptions often implicit in anthropological work that seem to make religious belief incompatible with anthropological research and theory. There may be some necessary tension between Christianity and anthropology, but we believe it can be a generative, creative tension for people of either group, and even more so for individuals like us who belong to both groups. Christians are often uncomfortable with anthropology for a variety of reasons. Some Christians’ discomfort has centered on the issue of human origins and evolution. For others it comes from the particular kind of relativism espoused by some anthropologists that denies the truth of Scripture (for more on different kinds of relativism, see chap. 2). But at the same time, Christians have successfully integrated the study of anthropology into their colleges, universities, seminaries, and missions training programs. Wheaton College was one of the first liberal arts colleges of any kind to have a cultural anthropology major. Biola University has established a master’s degree program in cultural anthropology. Many other educational institutions use anthropology to teach cross-cultural understanding, mission, intercultural studies, or just anthropology in and of itself.

Anthropology and Missions

Missionaries often engage in multiple tasks simultaneously. In addition to serving in pastoral positions, they may have medical duties, educational work, economic development projects, and more. In order to be effective, they must understand how to communicate and live effectively in the culture. Anthropology is often an important part of that understanding. First, many missionaries spend time studying the anthropological research on a particular group or place before they go. They learn not only about history, customs, traditions, beliefs, and values, but they also are able to read about daily life, community dynamics, and processes of change that will be critical in introducing the gospel or strengthening the church.

Second, missionaries often study anthropological theory and method so they will be equipped to study the context personally. No matter how well-researched a particular place or people may be, cultural change and local specificity make it imperative that missionaries are equipped to do their own anthropological research. A number of the largest North American seminaries have one or more anthropologists teaching in their mission education programs. Missionaries can become expert ethnographers, using participant observation, ethnographic interviews, surveys, and other research techniques to learn about another culture. They apply their research to their mission work

and sometimes also publish it in anthropology journals. In this way, Christian anthropologists are actively involved in helping missionaries become more effective in their calling.

Anthropologists have long been involved in missionary organizations such as Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL International (formerly known as the Summer Institute of Linguistics), the Christian and Missionary Alliance church network, and many others. Some of the earliest missionaries took anthropological research to heart in thinking about how the new converts in the places they worked could become Christians while maintaining their own cultural identities. This notion, which has come to be called “contextualization” or “indigenization,” grew out of the interaction of anthropology and missiology as Christians throughout the world understood how effective communication and practice of the Christian faith relies on cultural understanding (see chap. 12).

Many Christians going into anthropology find themselves having to defend or correct the views some anthropologists have about missionaries. In some cases anthropologists have encountered missionaries who lack sensitivity to culture and work in ways that ignore or denigrate cultural differences. Other anthropologists have formed opinions of missionaries based on stereotypes and rumors. Certainly, for anthropologists who are not Christians, the idea of missionaries working to change the religious commitments of non-Christians can be seen as “destroying culture.”

Missionaries themselves often acutely experience the creative tension between anthropology and Christianity. Some missionaries have had experiences with anthropologists who provide negative examples of the discipline. For missionaries, who often work alongside local Christian leaders for better health care, political rights, and human dignity, the commitments of some anthropologists to “leave people alone” can be seen as a despicable lack of concern for real human needs.

Despite these difficult conflicts, however, anthropology has made profound contributions to mission work, and many missionaries find that the tensions produce a sharpened ability to explain the Christian faith, to live peaceably with those of other faiths or no faith, and to acknowledge the failures and mistakes Christians have made. As the church grows and develops outside European and North American contexts, the need for cross-cultural understanding on the part of Christians will only continue to grow.

Christians and Basic Research in Anthropology

Many Christians come to anthropology with interests other than mission and participate in the discipline as scholars, professors, and applied scientists. Christian anthropologists have become world-renowned experts in areas of

Participant observation circa 1970—Agta man trying to teach Thomas Headland how to hunt with bow and arrow, here showing the ethnographer how to lie in wait in a tree to ambush passing deer. No game shot that day!
Photo: Thomas Headland



anthropological research that seem far from explicitly Christian concerns. Thomas Headland, an ecological anthropologist trained at the University of Hawaii and affiliated with SIL International for many years, conducted research on people living in the forests of the Philippines that became central to understanding the forest ecosystem and human life for ecological anthropologists everywhere.¹⁵

Dean Arnold, who studied at the University of Illinois and taught at Pennsylvania State University prior to teaching at Wheaton College, conducted research on potters and cultural change among Yucatec Mayan communities in Mexico. He published his research in 1986 in a book with Cambridge University Press that became a key text for archaeologists and cultural anthropologists working with economic change and social life among indigenous people of Latin America.¹⁶

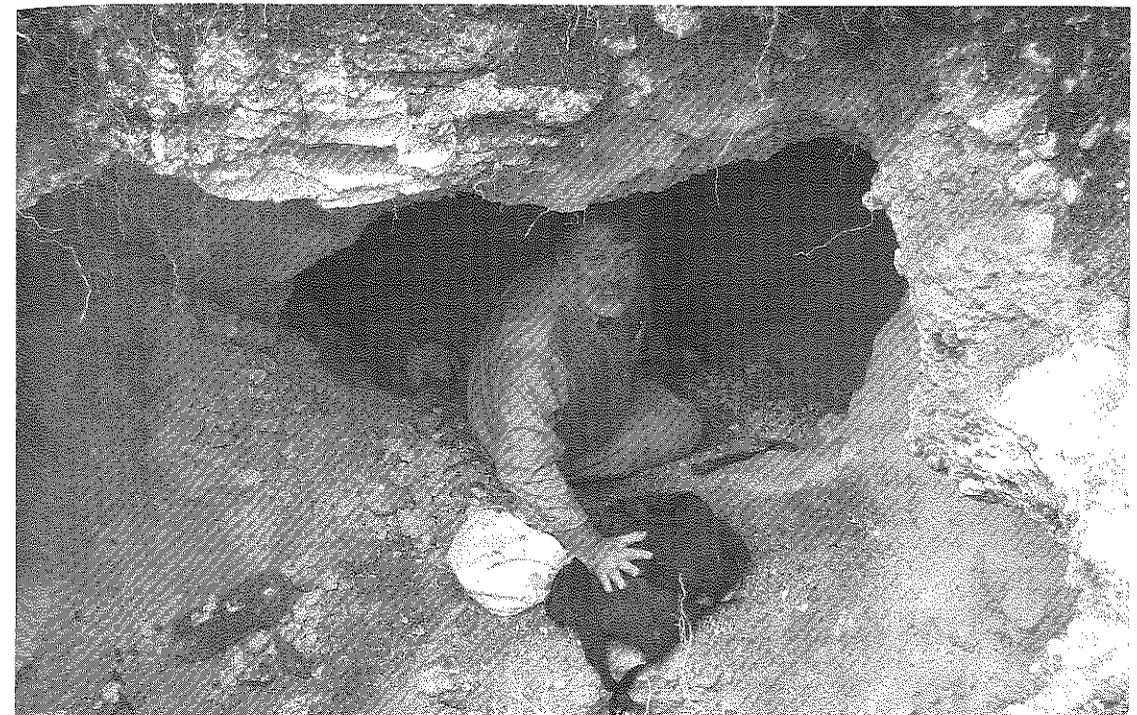
Our own research on such topics as race, global Christianity, and anthropological theory has been published with secular publishers and journals, speaking to larger anthropological discussions.¹⁷

Christians in anthropology have published work on everything from craft production among the ancient Mesoamerican people of Tarasco to the lives

15. Thomas Headland and John Early, *Population Dynamics of a Philippine Rainforest People: The Ildefonso Agta* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1998).

16. Dean Arnold, *Ceramic Theory and Cultural Process* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

17. See, for example, Brian M. Howell, "The Repugnant Cultural Other Speaks Back: Christianity as Ethnographic Standpoint," *Anthropological Theory* 7, no. 4 (2007): 371–91. Also Jenell Williams Paris, "'We've seen this coming': Resident Activists Shaping Redevelopment in Washington, D.C.," *Transforming Anthropology* 10, no. 1 (2001): 28–38.



Dean Arnold studying clay used in the production of pottery among Mayan potters in the Yucatan in 2007.
Photo: Dean Arnold

of market women in contemporary India. Like all scientific research, however, the importance of this knowledge is not always obvious in its immediate application to social problems.¹⁸ Similar to the work Christians do in chemistry, biology, history, or literature, this research becomes the foundation on which future scholars build.

Anthropology and the Global Church

As Christians, we are practicing a faith born in an ancient Middle Eastern context, first preached in a language (Aramaic) we do not speak, originally recorded in yet a different language (Koine Greek), developed among a multicultural religious minority in a now-extinct empire, passed through multiple European, African, and Asian cultures over thousands of years, and finally interpreted among the technological complexity of the twenty-first century. In other words, simply being a Christian is a cross-cultural experience.

18. See Amy Hirshman, "Tarascan Ceramic Production and Implications for Ceramic Distribution," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 19, no. 2 (2008): 299–310. Also Eloise Hiebert Meneses, *Love and Revolutions: Market Women and Social Change in India* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007).

Traditional ritual ceremonies, called *kanyaw*, are seldom practiced nowadays. Due to economic and religious changes, most Ikalahan host Christian prayer services, or *gimong*, which continue many of the elements of *kanyaw* ceremonies, such as providing food for the whole community.

Photos: Katrina Friesen



This truth is amplified by the cultural diversity of the global church today. Christians worship in thousands of different languages, use myriad instruments and musical forms, and pray in ways that can seem strange to their Christian brothers and sisters in other places. This diversity is a gift and part of God's plan for the church, but it poses challenges for being unified (as Jesus prayed in John 17:21).

The movement of God around the world is reason for Christians everywhere to rejoice, but without the ability to relate with one another, we may become suspicious and isolated. It is all too easy to misinterpret unfamiliar practices of other Christians and to assume they are unbiblical. Christian house blessings in the Philippines, for example, in which the blood of a sacrificed pig is painted above the door, initially may appear to some Christians outside this context to be syncretic remnants of a pre-Christian past.

From such a perspective, it would be easy to think these practices will pass away as people become "mature" Christians, or even that such ceremonies reflect a lack of understanding of Christian theology. In fact,

among the Ikalahan, these ceremonies are revivals of traditions that have not been practiced for decades. They reflect the desires of some younger Ikalahan, including many with theological training, to reconnect with their culture while strengthening their Christian identity. While Christians everywhere (including U.S. Christians) do things that are not in line with Scripture, without a clear understanding of why differences exist, what they mean, where they came from, and how they fit with other parts of culture, we risk misunderstanding and unnecessary division. Anthropology develops the abilities to ask the right questions, observe more critically, and think more deeply about the differences and similarities we will encounter as the church continues to grow and diversify.

Terms

anthropological perspective: the approach to social research that seeks to understand culture from the point of view of the people *within* that cultural context.

anthropology: the holistic study of humankind.

applied anthropology: branch of anthropology in which practitioners use anthropology in the service of particular social concerns.

archaeology: the study of material artifacts to understand a people's culture and society, usually in the past.

cultural anthropology: the description, interpretation, and analysis of similarities and differences in human cultures.

Cultural Other: a term used to refer to the subjective experience of difference at the cultural level; identifying "us/me" and "them/you" through cultural symbols and markers.

ethnoarchaeology: an approach to archaeology that combines the analysis of material life with information taken from contemporary populations.

ethnographic fieldwork: anthropology's hallmark research method, based upon the anthropologist's direct experience in a culture.

ethnographic interviews: purposeful, documented conversation with research participants that may be formal or informal.

ethnography: a rich description and analysis of a culture that includes the anthropologist's experience of "being there."

excavation: a rigorous method of extracting artifacts from underground; the primary data collection method of archaeologists.

focus groups: a type of interview in which small groups of people are asked to discuss a particular topic while the anthropologist takes notes.

"go native": an expression referring to a phenomenon in which an anthropologist fully affiliates with the culture being studied.

holistic understanding: the view that all parts of human life—from birthing practices to the economy to warfare to art—are interconnected.

life history: an interview or series of interviews that document the trajectory of a single life.

linguistics: the subfield of anthropology devoted to the study of language.

mapping: diagramming geographical space or human interpretation and use of space.

Mound Builders: a Native American group known for their burial mounds.

participant observation: an approach to research that combines participation and observation in various ways to optimize understanding of the culture being studied.

physical (or biological) anthropology: the study of human anatomy, nonhuman primates (primatology), and human origins.

primatology: the study of nonhuman primates.

qualitative research methods: interpretive approaches that use participant observation, interviews, document analysis, and other methods to understand the nature and meaning of phenomena.

quantitative research methods: measurement-based approaches that rely on mathematics, statistics, and hypotheses for producing and interpreting data.

rapid ethnographic assessment procedures (REAP): the time-compressed use of focus groups, ethnographic interviews, mapping, and other methods within a framework of participant observation.

rapprochement: a relationship of conversational ease with individuals and groups.

survey: a standardized set of questions applied to numerous individuals or places.

Devotion 1

Jesus the Participant Observer

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matt. 9:35–38)

The first time Matthew describes Jesus as being moved with compassion is after Jesus spent time traveling, teaching, and healing. Jesus's compassion was stirred when he *saw* the crowds. His love was not abstract or distant; Jesus lived among people, saw them, touched them, and loved them.

For Christian anthropologists, participant observation can be a spiritual practice. Anthropological research is never distant or detached. Like Jesus's ministry, anthropological research involves being close to people, speaking

their language, eating their food, participating in their weddings and funerals, and caring about their concerns. In a sense, Jesus could even be described as God doing participant observation. In Jesus, God came to live among us and experience our lives as we do. Of course, just as the anthropologist retains elements of her or his own distinctive identity, so Jesus was still "Other" (divine), even as he shared fully in our humanity. Although an anthropologist never "incarnates" from one context to another, like Jesus, anyone can draw closer in understanding and love through participating as fully as possible in another's world. Jesus's life and ministry provides wonderful inspiration for anthropologists doing fieldwork.

Devotion 2

Fulfilling the Great Commission

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matt. 28:16–20)

Jesus gave his disciples the monumental task of making disciples of all nations. They took up the challenge, spending the rest of their lives spreading the gospel. Jesus's message is meant for all other believers as well, and Christians today are as challenged by the Great Commission as the eleven men who heard it spoken by Jesus.

What Jesus did not mean was to go and make some disciples *in* each country (although such a thing is not contrary to the spirit of the passage). The word translated "nations" here (*ethnos*) refers to the culture of a people, an ethnic group. Jesus was calling his disciples, then and now, to help everyone understand how the gospel is meant to penetrate all our ways of thinking, living, acting, and relating. Jesus was calling his followers to make disciples of all *ethne*. The gospel must become intimately entwined with the ways we all live, even as it calls us to transformation.

Sharing Jesus's message with people of all *ethne* requires travel, language skills, and cross-cultural understanding. We must work hard to think with people in a different culture about what it would mean for them to become disciples of Jesus. Cultural anthropology helps us fulfill the Great Commission by preparing Christians to go to all *ethne* and speak and live effectively.

The Concept of Culture

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Define culture and describe its development within anthropology.
2. Distinguish between the three major types of ethnocentrism.
3. Evaluate common metaphors for culture.
4. Appreciate culture as a good part of God's creation.

Introduction

The term "culture" is used so often today, in phrases such as "multiculturalism," "cultural diversity," and "the culture wars," that culture often seems like a real thing that exists as a taken-for-granted part of our world. Culture is an idea created to describe a reality that people experience, the behaviors and assumptions common to a group that distinguish one group from others. Scholars who would come to be called cultural or social anthropologists became more aware of the similarities and differences between these behaviors, assumptions, and patterns, and realized that what seemed "natural" or simply "human" in one place was often different or even completely unknown in another. The idea of culture—and later, cultures—helps explain human similarities and differences.

Chapter Outline

Introduction
The Ethnic Fair
History of the Culture Concept
Cultural Relativism
Varieties of Ethnocentrism
Xenophobia
Cultural superiority
Tacit ethnocentrism
The Culture Concept Today
Learned
Adaptive
Shared
Integrated
Metaphors for Culture
Culture as the water in which we swim
Culture as the lenses through which we see the world
Christ and culture
Culture as a Conversation

The culture concept is both central and controversial in anthropology. It is an indispensable part of the discipline, but one that can cause confusion and disagreement. Whenever anyone—anthropologist or not—talks about culture, the question must be asked: What exactly are we talking about?

In this chapter, we first critique a common way of defining culture, the “ethnic fair” model. Then, we recount how anthropologists have defined culture over the course of the discipline’s development. Next, we describe related concepts: cultural relativism and the varieties of ethnocentrism. Finally, we conclude with a look at contemporary definitions of culture and metaphors for culture. Throughout, we consider ways in which the culture concept can be beneficial for Christians.

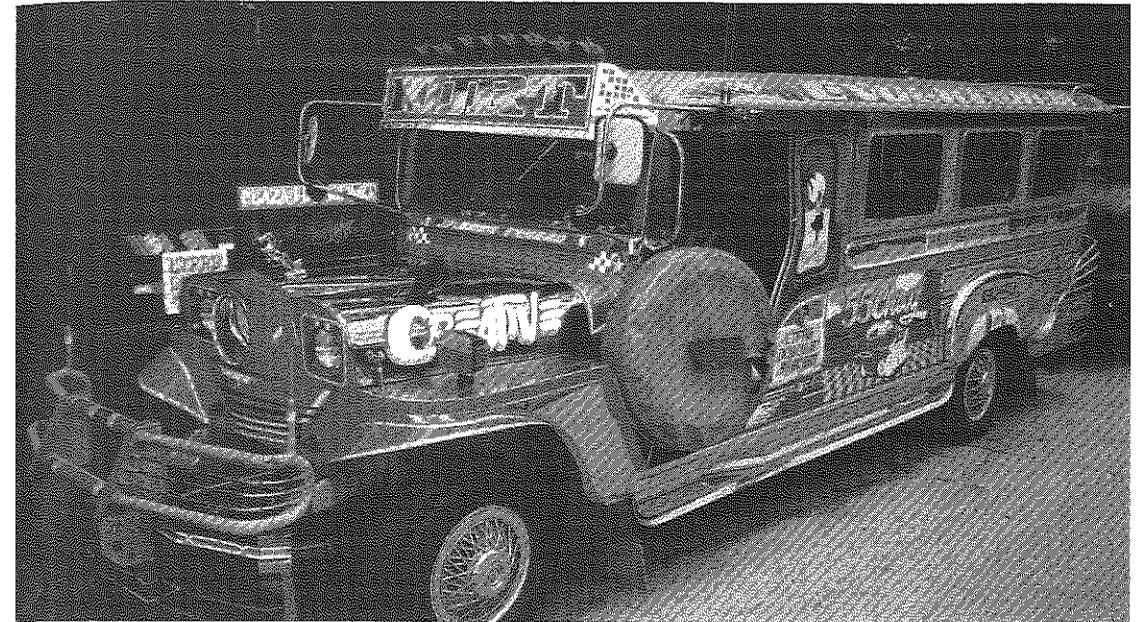
The Ethnic Fair

Imagine you are invited to participate in an ethnic fair. Your ancestors come from the Philippines, so you decide to introduce the fairgoers to “Philippine culture.” What do you put in your booth? You might start with the flag, hanging it prominently on the back of the booth. Then you may set out a CD player with traditional Philippine folk songs. Next, you put up a photo of a Philippine landscape, perhaps something tropical, maybe rice fields or a coastal fishing scene. Of course, you’d also want a picture of the distinctive Philippine *jeepney*, the common mode of transportation throughout the islands. Some lists of facts—population, the number of islands (more than seven thousand!), and a few historical notes—might appear. Finally, you’d display some food, probably *lumpia*, the fried Filipino egg roll that people everywhere find delicious.

Now what if you’re asked to represent the United States? No problem; just set out McDonald’s hamburgers instead of *lumpia* and play country music instead of folk songs. But what about jazz? Or bluegrass? Or hip-hop? Those are all distinctively U.S. musical genres too. And if you’re going to show scenery, do you choose the Grand Canyon or the Appalachian Mountains? New York City or rural Iowa? Which foods, music, or landscapes really represent “U.S. culture”?

When people think about their own “culture,” they often become aware of the differences between regions and individual experiences that make generalizations difficult. You may be a vegetarian who listens to indie British rock and have no interest in the Grand Canyon or New York City. Does that make you less of a U.S. American? What is real “U.S. culture”?

The same issues arise with Philippine culture. The millions of Philippine citizens who live in the high mountains of the north do not traditionally eat rice and fish, but sweet potato and wild deer. Many in the south are Muslims whose style of dance and art resembles that performed in Jakarta, Indonesia,



The colorful Philippine jeepney is an expression of cultural identity, even though many Filipinos own their own cars, ride bicycles, or take the bus to work. Photo: Brian Howell

rather than Manila. Furthermore, millions of people living in the major cities are more comfortable at Starbucks than in a rice paddy behind a *carabao* (water buffalo). And every day, millions of Filipinos enjoy McDonald’s hamburgers. So which is the true “Filipino culture”?

Ethnic fairs are enjoyable and educational to some extent, but this approach to culture has several problems. First, it implies that culture is primarily expressed through decorative material items like food, clothing, and holiday trinkets. With an ethnic fair display, it is difficult to convey how profoundly culture shapes all parts of life. Second, it leads us to think of culture as a fixed and bounded entity, one that can be easily judged as “authentic” or “inauthentic.” For this reason, culture change is often seen as culture loss, particularly for so-called traditional people. This is not to say that change is always good, or that cultures are indefinable, but the notion of culture as a fixed entity within specific boundaries contradicts the anthropological view of culture as dynamic and fluid. Third, it implies that each individual belongs to only one culture, when in fact many people are bicultural or multicultural, blending cultural elements into their lives and families in various ways.

History of the Culture Concept

The English word “culture” comes from the German *Kultur*, meaning to develop or grow. It is the root of words such as “agriculture” and “horticulture.” As a more abstract concept referring to the advance or growth of “spirit,”

“mind,” or “civilization,” it was present in Greek philosophy and resurfaced among German idealist philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, and Johann Herder in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In spite of these early roots, however, contemporary anthropological notions of culture as the total way of life of a group of people did not emerge until the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Victorian-era British anthropologists began comparing reports from colonial administrators, explorers, and missionaries around the world to discern patterns of behavior and belief among disparate groups. (For more on these early anthropologists, see chap. 11.) These first anthropologists are now often called *armchair anthropologists* for their gathering of data from travelogues and books rather than from their own direct research. They were most interested in explaining why groups were so different from one another. Building on the biological theories of evolution advanced by Charles Darwin and others, these scholars assumed all societies moved from simple to complex forms in progressive evolutionary stages. They developed an idea of Culture as a singular capacity that all human beings possessed to greater and lesser degrees. These anthropologists did not talk about different cultures, only the differences in Culture, with a capital C. In this view, all cultural development followed a single path, or line, from simple to complex.

This view developed into the theory of *unilinear cultural evolution*, which stated that all cultures evolve from simple to complex along a single trajectory of progress. “Higher development” was manifested in social and political systems such as market economies or democracy, technological innovations such as metallurgy, and complex religious beliefs in which the highest form was no religion at all but a commitment to scientific atheism.¹ Not surprisingly, the northern European scientists who developed the theory defined northern Europeans as having progressed to having the “most Culture,” while non-European people were seen as less evolved, living in a simpler, less civilized state.

For decades, European and U.S. anthropologists used Culture to classify societies as higher or lower on a scale of cultural development. This notion is not only repulsive to most people today but has been thoroughly discredited by anthropologists themselves. U.S. English does retain a remnant of this view, however. References to a person as “cultured”—meaning he or she has expensive, fancy, or rarified tastes (“We’re going to take you to the opera and get you some culture!”)—refers to this older idea that an individual can have more or less Culture than someone else.

Though it would ultimately lead to negative consequences for both Christians and anthropologists, many nineteenth-century Christians accepted the

1. See Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols. (1874; repr., Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2007).

theory of unilinear cultural evolution. For Christians, the unilinear theory was important because it contradicted the idea of *polygenesis*, the widely held nineteenth-century theory that different groups of humans appeared on earth or were created separately. In other words, the unilinear theory fit with the view that all humans originate from a single creation of God (*monogenesis*).

Although unilinear cultural evolution seemed to support the Christian belief in all humans originating from a single creation, it also supported *cultural superiority*, the idea that people of one culture are more enlightened, advanced, civilized, or intelligent than another and *racism*, the belief that humans are organized into race groupings that are different from one another in intelligence and worth. The question raised by the unilinear theory was why some groups remained at lower levels of development while others advanced. Linking with earlier theories of racial hierarchy, the unilinear theory seemed to provide scientific support for biological explanations of difference. Put simply, many argued that some races were inherently superior to others, seen in their higher levels of Culture. For decades, anthropologists and other scientists used race theories to explore supposed biological differences between culturally distinct groups. Proponents of slavery and discrimination, advocates for eugenics, and even the Nazis used these theories to support their views. Many Christians fought vigorously against such movements, yet often inadvertently advanced the idea that cultural differences should be ranked as higher and lower. Thus, for some Christians, to follow Christ also meant to adopt “advanced” Culture.

Fortunately, in the early twentieth century, even though some anthropologists still worked to bolster racial theories and the unilinear notion of culture, others began to critique it. Around the turn of the century, anthropologists moved out of their armchairs and began promoting ethnographic fieldwork as the best, if not the only, method for truly understanding different societies (see chap. 1). By immersing themselves in other cultures for long periods of time, anthropologists found that supposedly simple societies actually had complex social and cultural lives. Lacking systems of elections or political office, for instance, did not mean a lack of structure, power, or authority. Supposedly racially inferior people had complex organizational systems and cultural norms that took anthropologists years to understand—hardly strong support for racial inferiority or cultural simplicity. Such discoveries led anthropologists to advance the idea that differences between groups were not linked to biological predisposition. Cultural diversity, then, was not the manifestation of Culture at different stages of development, but evidence of fully developed cultures that had taken different paths based on particular historical and environmental contexts.

This new theory, which would come to be called *historical particularism*, argued that each culture is a unique representation of its history and context.

This theory discarded Culture in favor of cultures, and it supported research that looked at various cultural groups as complex and sophisticated adaptations to particular challenges. Over time, some anthropologists used materialist theories (often rooted in Marxist political economy) to explain contemporary cultures. Others focused more on psychological needs and pressures, linguistic constructs, or cognitive categories as the key to understanding how and why people in one place developed ways of thinking and living so different from people in another. (More detailed information on these theories can be found in chap. 11.)

Today, in light of globalization, communication technologies, and urbanization, anthropologists emphasize the importance of seeing cultures as complex, with permeable boundaries, instead of as isolated, bounded entities. At one time, anthropologists deliberately sought out seemingly bounded societies. Several of the first well-known anthropological studies were of groups living on islands in the South Pacific; each group seemed literally bounded, surrounded by ocean. It seemed very obvious where the limits of the “culture” existed. Even then, however, these boundaries were anthropological fictions, drawn according to features of language or identity the anthropologist saw as important. Connections existed even among seemingly separate cultures; for example, regional exchange systems linked island societies through regular interactions of economic interdependence. In later years, the constructed nature of these boundaries would become even clearer as members of these societies traveled and communicated in the global community. The “ethnic fair” assumptions about cultures as neatly bounded and highly homogeneous entities simply didn’t withstand scrutiny.

In addition to the internal complexity of cultures, anthropologists now emphasize power dynamics: the ways in which differences in wealth and prestige (or access to wealth and prestige) shape the human experience. A village in the Yucatan might seem peaceful and serene, but even there, older men may dominate younger men and women; religious specialists may use their knowledge to control nonspecialists; those with charisma may exploit others not so gifted. Anthropologists employ postmodern theories of language and power to conceptualize culture as an arena where individuals and groups of individuals *within* a particular society advance their own interests.

This understanding of culture—as plural, porous, and power-laden—has led anthropologists to reevaluate the meaning of cultural differences. If there is no singular direction to “progress”—if cultures change in response to historical events, environmental issues, and power dynamics—cultural differences must be evaluated on their own terms. In other words, cultures can only be understood relative to the historical, ecological, and social context in which they developed. This is the foundational anthropological concept of cultural relativism.

Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is the view that cultural practices and beliefs are best understood in relation to their entire context. A symbol, belief, or behavior may make little sense or even be offensive when understood from an outsider’s cultural perspective. When viewed holistically, in light of its own economic, historical, political, and religious contexts, what at first seemed nonsensical will appear sensible. Thus, culture is relative to context.

The idea of cultural relativism is one of the most important principles of cultural anthropology, but it is often misunderstood, particularly among Christians. The word “relativism” may raise worries about secular scholars attacking Christian truth claims, or any truth claims at all. Understood correctly, however, cultural relativism poses no conflict for Christians. Cultural relativism is not a value judgment but an empirical reality. That is, everywhere in the world people find ways to live in response to changing conditions. In fact, as we explain below, cultural relativism affirms deeply held Christian values and is an important aspect of life in the global church.

Cultural relativism does not imply that any particular belief is right or that a specific action is good simply because it is part of a culture. For example, I (Brian) recall a class in graduate school in which my professor was showing slides of the Kofyar, a people who raise grains in the high plateau of Nigeria. In one photo, a man was working alone, obviously struggling to lift the large sheaves of sorghum² into the high rack used for drying. As we stared at the anomalous photo, the professor remarked, “Oh yeah, this guy has to work alone. He’s a Protestant.” My curiosity was piqued about the connection between working alone and being a Protestant. I learned that these particular Protestants are Baptists who believe drinking alcohol of any kind is taboo for Christians. Of course, many Christians throughout the world affirm the same teaching. The problem for Kofyar Christians is that this belief sets them apart as inhospitable and isolated from community. Kofyar beer is a thick, carbohydrate-rich sorghum beer only available during the harvest season. Women prepare large vats of the rich brew to share with neighbors and relatives who come to help with the harvest. Beer provides both the energy to work all day and the festive atmosphere enjoyed by the community during the days of hard labor. Beer is a symbol of hospitality and community; all the men drink from a common vessel. Without an offering of this drink, the Protestants generally cannot get anyone to come help them with their harvest. As a result, they are seen as abandoning values of hospitality and community. They end up somewhat isolated, which puts them at a serious economic disadvantage.

2. Sorghum is a tall grain used as animal feed and in making beer and sorghum molasses for human consumption.

Understanding the relationship between beer and work does not imply that drinking beer is good or bad. In many places, alcohol consumption causes social problems; domestic abuse, alcoholism, and traffic fatalities are linked to beer consumption in many societies. In some of these places beer is as much a symbol of domineering masculinity—not conducive to family life—as it is a symbol of productive community. For these reasons (and others), some Christians may teach that drinking is prohibited.³ What is missing in the Kofyar case, however, is an understanding of how beer ties into economic and social life. Without an understanding of what beer consumption means in economic and social terms, Christians may misunderstand the consequences giving up beer will have on important areas of life.

Cultural relativism is distinct from moral relativism or epistemological relativism. *Moral relativism* is the idea that something is only right or wrong according to context-specific criteria. This notion is incompatible with Christian faith and ethics, and also is virtually impossible to put into practice. Virtually all anthropologists, Christian or not, make moral judgments when they see human rights violations such as genocide or torture. If they are not Christian, they may rely on humanistic values—that is, principles common to most humans—or the ethical code of the American Anthropological Association to evaluate right or wrong in cross-cultural contexts. Few, however, would say everything is morally neutral.

Epistemological relativism is the belief that the validity of knowledge itself is limited to the context in which it was produced. This is the idea that some things are “true for you, but not true for me,” or even “real for you, but not real for me.” The epistemological relativist would argue that truth in the world of the Kofyar is different from, say, truth among suburban U.S. Americans. Though the Kofyar and the U.S. American may experience the world quite differently, the Christian theology of revelation—that God has revealed knowledge to everyone—says that reality is not merely a reflection of experience. The triune God and the world God made exist independent of human perception or perspective and we can know these things through revelation, perception, and reflection. Though our knowledge may always be partial, it is not relative.

Cultural relativism does not demand the acceptance of either moral or epistemological relativism. We can hold to Christian ethics and morality while still acknowledging that cultures can best be understood in relation to themselves. When cultural relativism is not practiced, people typically use the

3. Some Christian traditions point to biblical injunctions against drunkenness and to contemporary research on addiction in order to support a position against consuming alcohol of any kind. Others believe that only drunkenness is prohibited, while consumption is a matter of Christian freedom. See, for example, the Southern Baptist resolution on alcohol (www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=1156); in contrast, see the Presbyterian (USA) statement (www.pcusa.org/101/101-alcohol.htm).

standards of their own culture to understand others, which invariably leads to misunderstandings rooted in ethnocentrism.

Varieties of Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is the use of one’s own culture to measure another’s, putting one’s own culture (*ethno*) at the center (*centrism*) of interpretation and typically devaluing the other culture. Ethnocentrism is inevitable because humans are socialized to see their way of life as normal, natural, and often superior. Nonetheless, it is important to identify ethnocentrism in ourselves and in the world and work toward reducing it.

Anthropologists may distinguish between three types of ethnocentrism: xenophobia, cultural superiority, and tacit ethnocentrism.

Xenophobia

Xenophobia is an intense, irrational dislike of people from other countries or cultures. Xenophobia is sometimes expressed in anti-immigrant views or even discrimination or violence against Cultural Others. The most pervasive expression of xenophobia in the world today is racism. As we noted before, racism is the belief that humans are organized into race groupings that are different from one another in intelligence and worth. Racism asserts the superiority of some people over others, as expressed by such U.S. groups as the Ku Klux Klan or the World Church of the Creator. Despite efforts against it, xenophobia continues to motivate massive harm around the world in expressions ranging from genocide to political oppression to hate crimes to verbal assault. Fortunately, many people around the world have become increasingly sensitive to this bigotry and speak out against it.

Cultural superiority

The second type of ethnocentrism, *cultural superiority*, is the belief that one culture is more enlightened, advanced, civilized, or intelligent than another. It is often expressed with patronizing comments such as, “Those people just don’t know any better,” or, “If we can teach these people how we live, then they can become as advanced as we are.” Cultural superiority can be found all over the world; no society has a monopoly on cultural arrogance. Cultural superiority has devastating effects when a group of people has sufficient power and privilege to impose their ethnocentrism on other groups. For example, European colonial governments in North America, Africa, Asia, Australia, and elsewhere imposed their European educational systems and languages on indigenous people, suppressing many important cultural and subsistence practices. At times, this was motivated by xenophobia (“their ways are bad, wrong, immoral, or

Is the United States a “Christian Culture?”

It is not uncommon to hear someone refer to the United States as a “Christian nation.” They might be thinking about the history of European settlers and the importance of Christianity to them. They might be thinking of the prominence of Christian symbols and phrases in public life. Or they may say that the United States has a “Christian culture.” But can a culture be Christian?

First, it’s important to note that to refer to the United States as “a culture” is to confuse national and cultural categories. As described earlier, the United States has a great deal of cultural diversity. But to the extent that there are widespread norms, shared understandings, and familiar symbols among many U.S. Americans, can’t we say that, on the whole, the U.S. is a Christian culture?

We must keep in mind that to be a Christian is to follow Christ. A culture cannot choose to give its life to Christ. Only people can do that. Certainly a place where many people have lived as Christians for a long time has adopted more Christian symbolism in language, law, education, and other aspects of society than a place that doesn’t; but this does not make the culture, as a whole, a follower of Jesus.

But isn’t it true that the United States has a more Christian culture than, say, communist China? More

non-Christians in the United States might be better informed about Christianity than non-Christians in China, but it is not true that an entire culture can be more Christian than another. Indeed, U.S. culture, for all its Christian history and symbolism, also values sexual freedom, individual autonomy, and materialism. Secular culture in China reflects values of social connectedness, family loyalty, and spirituality. So is China “more Christian” than the United States?

Some aspects of U.S. culture connect strongly to biblical teachings. For example, the individual autonomy prized in the United States resonates with the biblical call for people to abandon their lives to follow Christ. Those of us raised in the United States may find it easier to turn from the teachings of a non-Christian family or non-Christian friends for the sake of Christ. At the same time, the family loyalty of China may make it harder for some to leave the religion of their families, but it may also make it easier for Christians there to understand and practice the biblical metaphor of the church as family. Christians in every culture find themselves at odds with some things in their background, while other aspects of the same culture help them to live more faithfully with Christ.

immature”) and at other times by paternalistic cultural superiority (“we need to teach everyone to live like we do, so they can be civilized too”). Either way, the result was the devastation of indigenous cultures worldwide.

Today most Christians reject these ethnocentric attitudes because they are in opposition to the gospel. Indeed, in the book of Acts, Paul opposed his own people’s (Jews’) ethnocentrism toward non-Jewish converts. Across time, God has empowered brave Christians who risked their lives to lead movements against racism and xenophobia in societies around the world. But even those opposed to xenophobia and cultural superiority may still harbor the third kind of ethnocentrism: tacit ethnocentrism.

Tacit ethnocentrism

Tacit ethnocentrism is the assumption that one’s own way of life is just normal, not cultural. Tacit ethnocentrism is present, for example, when a person

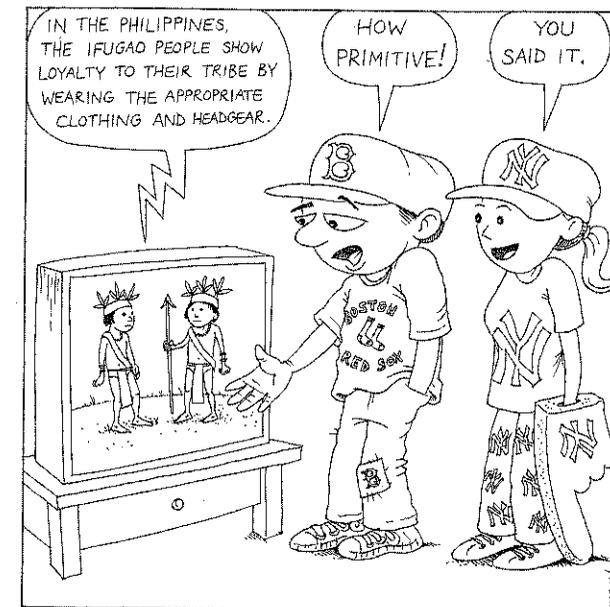
does not see anything particularly cultural about liking ice in a glass of water, or finding a mountain lake beautiful, or wanting a soft bed off the floor. He might understand that many people from India *don’t* put ice in their water but easily assume it must be because they are poor and do not have ice-makers or have simply never experienced how wonderful cold water is. He may not hold it against them, but he might still think not wanting ice is different, interesting, and maybe a little weird. In a perspective shaped by tacit ethnocentrism, the curiosity is why they do not like ice, not why we do. One’s own culture (*ethno*) takes center stage (*centrism*), and the other culture is understood in terms of how it is not like one’s own.

As an example, consider camping. Many people in the United States find camping or other encounters with nature to be profound spiritual experiences. We Christians often find that nature stirs our souls to ponder our smallness in the face of God’s grandeur. We may interpret these feelings as natural and human, as the testimony of creation pointing to the Creator (Job 12:7–11).

Such scenes may not produce these feelings at all, however, for people who actually live close to nature. They may know their lake intimately—how to spot wind or water currents, when and where fish congregate, the most likely spots for turtles’ nests—and they may respect and cherish this resource, but they may not have anything like a soulful, spiritual response. They may also see the world as pointing to God as Creator, but in terms of how nature provides for human life rather than in sublime feelings of awe.

Similarly, people from urban subcultures in the United States often express frustration that some (usually from the dominant ethnic/racial group) insist that *everyone* should love camping—that everyone can “naturally” see God better in the woods; you just have to try. One urban African American student at a Christian college expressed it this way, “You know, in my neighborhood, people do not go camping. They say, ‘I have a house. Why do I want to live in a little tent in the woods and have bugs crawling on me and eat in the dirt?’ But my friends here say there’s something wrong with me, that I just don’t get it. I’m tired of people telling me that they’re right and I’m wrong just because I don’t see it that way.”

This student did try camping, and in many ways he learned to enjoy it as his friends did. His frustration came from the fact that these friends did not see the differences as cultural but rather as a flaw in him. They seemed



to believe that *everyone* should love to experience nature as they do; surely that is just natural—a God-given response to creation. Actually, a spiritual experience in nature is a culturally conditioned response. It is surely connected to something beyond culture—God and creation—but it is not the only, the best, or the “natural” response.

In addition to blinding us to our own culture, tacit ethnocentrism can take the form of someone saying, “I have no culture. I’m boring. I’m just a normal, average person.” This might seem like a compliment to those deemed to *have* culture, but those who call themselves cultureless tacitly suggest that the ways they feel—their judgments, tastes, and reactions to the world—are just normal, human ones. “Others are different; I’m just normal.” “Others are ethnic; I’m just me.” The anthropological view of culture emphasizes that everyone is ethnic, because everyone is shaped by culture. Certainly biological responses are real; you touch a hot stove, you pull your hand back. But what do you say? “Ouch”? “Aahhh”? Or, if you’re in the Philippines, “Aray!” Even an instantaneous, unthinking response such as this is cultured.

Imagining human beings without culture does not paint a picture of a “pure” human. Our ability to interact with the world through culture is the very thing that *makes* us human. Human beings in the garden, before the fall, had language and were living in a world filled with cultural meaning. Adam alone, without society, was declared “not good.” God gave humans relationships, language, names, and an identity distinct from the rest of creation; this is culture, part of God’s good creation. It is not the barrier to understanding God; it is the means through which God becomes known to us.

The problem is when one particular cultural expression (all of which are now tainted by the fall) is seen as normal, natural, and human, and anything different from it as substandard, aberrant, or sinful. Combating ethnocentrism is a place where anthropology and Christian values come together. Acknowledging how tacit ethnocentrism plays into our assumptions should humble us into acknowledging the strengths and limitations of our vantage point on God’s world.

The Culture Concept Today

Culture is the total way of life of a group of people that is learned, adaptive, shared, and integrated. Each of these four characteristics—learned, adaptive, shared, and integrated—reflects important elements of the culture concept.

Learned

People learn culture from other people, usually by being raised in a culture or by extended exposure to a new one later in life. Affirming the learned aspect

of culture allows anthropologists to focus on such things as the socialization of children, the production of knowledge, and culture change. Anthropologists agree that ethnographic data provide no support for the notion that cultural differences come from biological differences or predisposition. Brain studies suggest that our brains take shape, to some degree, in response to our social and physical environment, but at birth every brain is ready to learn any culture. Stereotypes such as “Japanese people are quiet” or “People in the United States smile a lot” may reflect widespread cultural norms, but there is no demonstrable link between particular cultural forms and the biology of the people who practice those forms.

Adaptive

People’s ways of life are adapted to their environments. Language, values, and behaviors may be understood as related to their economic, political, geographical, and historical contexts. Sometimes journalistic reports of societies in the rain forests of the Amazon or Southeast Asia describe them as “living unchanged since the beginning of time.” This is flat-out wrong; all cultures have changed and continue to change. Some of these changes are dramatic and rapid. Some are imposed by outsiders. But even people living relatively remote and independent lives experience culture change in response to problems and opportunities in their environment.

Shared

There is no such thing as individual culture. There is variation among individuals, but culture can never be private. You may wake up one morning and decide to throw off the oppressive structure of English, bursting out of your room declaring, “Amtanzafna! Mooockano v Stinana!” If no one else shares this particular pattern, it cannot be called a language, which by definition is a form of communication. If no communication occurs, you just have random sounds. Unless others share your understanding of these symbols, they do not constitute a language or a culture.

Integrated

Any aspect of culture relates, in some way, to other parts of that culture. As demonstrated by the example of the Kofyar and their beer, some missionaries have thought that changing religion or giving up certain rituals, food, or drinks was a relatively simple thing. They have argued that in converting to Christianity, “culture” did not need to change, as long as these few key things changed. It is a mistake, however, to think that some aspects of culture can change without having unforeseen consequences on other aspects of culture.

It is important, when encouraging change in one's own culture or another, to recognize that change in one part of life will influence the whole.

Affirming the integrity of culture does not mean that any culture is perfectly or completely integrated. Within any culture, different individuals have different levels of knowledge and understanding, may agree or disagree with various aspects of their society, and may be working for or against change. Changes are often unpredictable and complex, unfolding over many years and among different subgroups.

Metaphors for Culture

People often use metaphors to describe culture and how we relate to it. Some metaphors are used by anthropologists, and others are popular with Christians or other groups in society. Though each has its strengths, each of the common metaphors for culture obscures an anthropological understanding.

Culture as the water in which we swim

In an effort to make the point that culture is pervasive, largely unconscious, and intrinsic to our very humanity, anthropologists have sometimes portrayed people as fish, constantly swimming in their culture. It goes with the old brainteaser, "Does a fish know it's wet?" This metaphor makes clear the important idea that culture is not a thing that we humans simply add on to our lives. Just as a fish needs water to survive and get around, so too human beings need culture.

The downside of this metaphor is that unlike fish, which cannot change water, humans can change their culture. For instance, fish cannot say, "With all these ships coming through, I think it would work better to change the chemical composition of water from H₂O to something less dense so these boats will sink. Let's try that out and see if it catches on." But human beings can devise ways of changing their culture. Thus, discussions of culture must include agency—how individuals and groups respond, adapt, and innovate within a cultural context resulting in intentional and unintentional changes to the culture itself.

Culture as the lenses through which we see the world

The idea that culture is like a set of glasses affecting how people see the world has been a favorite of missiologists for some very good reasons. Mission scholars and trainers want students to understand that cultures are not just different from one another but that cultural assumptions profoundly af-

fect how we perceive the world.⁴ Often coupled with the idea of worldview, this metaphor also highlights the pervasive nature of culture. If a man has trouble seeing (and this metaphor seems to assume universal astigmatism), he needs glasses to get around. Without any glasses at all, he's pretty limited. Culture is like that. Without culture, we don't see more clearly; we can't see much at all. However, we have to be aware that one set of "cultural glasses" is not the same prescription as others; thus one culture will have a different view from another.

The positive element of this metaphor is that it helps us become aware of our glasses and to consider what it would mean to view the world through someone else's glasses. We do not have to be "mono-glassical" (i.e., monocultural). Changing glasses is not easy, but it can be done. For anyone wanting to understand another, learning to see through that person's glasses seems to be a prerequisite to good communication.

This metaphor also contains several problems. First, it assumes that "American glasses" or "Korean glasses" will fit everyone of that description. We know there are more variations *within* contexts than this suggests, as well as variation over time. Second, the glasses image (and the idea of worldview) assumes culture exists inside someone's head before interacting with the material world. For example, in U.S. society, most people would recognize that cars are part of the culture. Owners often give them names and customize them, while the government builds neighborhoods and cities around the use of them. But did the United States come to value cars because of the idea or view of cars, or did a love of cars follow the development of cars themselves? The glasses metaphor does not capture well the dynamic interaction between the material world and our views or understandings of the world.

Last, the glasses metaphor limits discussion of power and change. When an optometrist makes a set of glasses, she cannot push a political, religious, or social agenda through the prescription. She is simply making the right glasses for her patient. The patient, for his part, can put them on or take them off as he chooses, without worrying about what the optometrist thinks or might do to him if he doesn't wear the glasses. Glasses are inert objects that do not change us; nor can we change them. They do not reflect the political, social, or economic interests of those making or wearing them. And it is hard to imagine glasses being affected by sin in the ways culture is.⁵

4. See, for example, Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1986), 31; also Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict: Building Relationships for Effective Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 12–20.

5. This is not to say that all those using the glasses metaphor (or any of the others) are endorsing these weaknesses or are unaware of the dynamics of culture we discuss here. By using the metaphor, however, they risk others misunderstanding the nature of culture as they employ the metaphor themselves.

Christ and culture

Perhaps more than any other theologian, H. Richard Niebuhr influenced the way Christians think about engaging culture with his categories: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ transforming culture.⁶ This may not seem like a metaphor, but it is. By typologizing the different ways Christians have interacted with social institutions and cultural norms in various times and places, Niebuhr made both Christianity and culture seem more concrete. This has helped Christians become aware of how they and their traditions tend to approach culture—with a stance of appreciation, rejection, or control—and to understand why other Christians see the issues differently.

As helpful as his work has been, however, Niebuhr's metaphor conceptualizes Christianity and culture as separate, discrete entities, like balls on a pool table bouncing against each other in occasional interactions. In fact, Christianity is, by definition, the expression of the gospel in a cultural context. There is no such thing as a nonspecific, free-floating "Christianity," existing apart from a particular time or place in which it is expressed. While the risen Christ does exist beyond a particular cultural context, our understandings of him occur in concrete cultural terms. Thus, regardless of which strategy for engagement a Christian may choose, this metaphor of Christ and culture is misleading in that it encourages Christians to think of themselves as existing outside culture, with unencumbered choice as to how they interact with culture. Anthropologists emphasize that all people, and all religions, exist within cultures and are influenced by culture in ways they are often unable to perceive.

Other metaphors—culture as the rules of the game, culture as a map, culture as a many-layered onion with surface features and deep features (or maybe culture as a parfait, since not everyone likes onions), highlight some features of the culture concept. All of them, however, tend to omit these vital facts: cultures are internally diverse, always changing, and affected by power.

Culture as a Conversation

Our preferred metaphor is culture as a conversation. In real life, a conversation has many of the qualities anthropologists affirm as aspects of culture. For example, like culture, a conversation is shared. At the same time, a conversation is dynamic. In any conversation different individuals, from moment to moment, respond to power, intention, use, and context. This reflects the dynamism anthropologists understand as part of the culture

6. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (1951; repr., San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001).

concept. Just as people might make up a new word in the course of a conversation ("Dude, that was a great speech! Total Ska-doosh!"), individuals can "play with" their culture to express something others understand in new ways. These innovations may or may not catch on, but they are always possible.

Body language, facial expression, tone of voice, and word choice are all critical aspects of communication. If you meet the president of the United States or the prime minister of Thailand, you are probably going to use different words (you might not say, "What up, Dawg?"), a different tone of voice, and even different body language than if you were speaking to your roommate. In any conversation, one person can subtly communicate superiority (a tone of voice, a patronizing hand on the shoulder) without saying it. It is not unusual to be put off by the way some people speak, even if what they say is not offensive. At the same time, all these choices—to be friendly, to convey superiority, to modify one's words to be more respectful, even to use certain language—are constrained by the meanings of words, grammar, symbols, and shared assumptions existing prior to the conversation. Individuals have freedom to shape the conversation, but this creativity is both enabled and limited by the context (i.e., culture) in which the conversation occurs.

The metaphor of culture as conversation captures the learned, adaptive, shared, and integrated aspects of the culture concept, while also allowing us to see how it is laden with power relationships and is open to individual creativity. In culture, as in conversation, there is improvisation and innovation. Individuals take what exists in order to accomplish or even imagine things they want to do, including innovative and novel things. People are limited by culture, in that they cannot do or even think absolutely anything. Yet culture is the medium that enables people to do what they want. As individuals interact through culture, they accomplish individual purposes through shared means. Understood this way, culture is not so much a *thing* that people *have* as it is an *activity* they *do*. Culture is a practice. Whether we're making conversation, pancakes, or a film, we are living within a culture while simultaneously making culture.

As Christians, then, we should not simply ignore the culture in which we find ourselves, as that invariably results in an unthinking acceptance of the status quo. Nor should we try to reject culture, becoming "just Christians" without any culture. God's truth is revealed to us through specific cultural forms. We then use our own cultural forms to understand that revelation. Sometimes we try to strip away the medium by which God communicates to us to get the "pure message" underneath. But God gave us different cultures so that we can understand God. The incarnation was God's statement that creation—culture, society, the human body—is a good thing that will be redeemed, not a necessary evil we must tolerate or repress until Christ comes again. Without culture, we have no language, no symbols, no revelation, and no community.

We are always Christians in particular times, places, and cultures. We were designed, from the beginning, to interact with God and each other through culture. As we do culture, we should be aware of the ways in which our particular culture falls short of reflecting God's character and priorities. As those creating culture all the time, we do have the ability to change and adapt our own cultures in positive ways. The reality that all cultural contexts are twisted by sin should make us even more determined to understand our own and others' cultures. With the anthropological perspective, we can understand the contours of our own (and others') cultures better, thus making us intentional about preserving or changing them.

In the book of Revelation, John provides a vision of the New Jerusalem, a city in which God rules over the diverse nations of the world, in which the kings bring their splendor before God (Rev. 21:24). Culture, and cultural diversity, will not be wiped away, but redeemed. This suggests that culture, in all its present diversity, is not a problem to be overcome but a blessing that will be present for eternity. It only makes sense that Christians would learn to understand it now.

Terms

armchair anthropologists: early anthropologists who gathered data from travelogues and books rather than from their own direct research.

cultural relativism: the view that cultural practices and beliefs are best understood in relation to their entire context.

cultural superiority: the belief that one culture is more enlightened, advanced, civilized, or intelligent than another.

culture: the total way of life of a group of people that is learned, adaptive, shared, and integrated.

epistemological relativism: the belief that the validity of knowledge itself is limited to the context in which it was produced.

ethnocentrism: the use of one's own culture to measure another's, putting one's own culture (*ethno*) at the center (*centrism*) of interpretation and typically devaluing the other culture.

historical particularism: an early anthropological theory that argues that each culture is a unique representation of its history and context.

monogenesis: the view that all humans originate from a single creation of God.

moral relativism: the idea that something is only right or wrong according to context-specific criteria.

polygenesis: the theory that various groups of humans appeared on earth or were created separately.

racism: the belief that humans are organized into race groupings that are different from one another in intelligence and worth.

tacit ethnocentrism: the assumption that one's own way of life is just normal, not cultural.

unilinear cultural evolution: an early anthropological theory that states all cultures evolve from simple to complex along a single trajectory of progress.

xenophobia: an intense, irrational dislike of people from other countries or cultures.

Devotion 1

Culture: The Pattern of This World

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Rom. 12:1–2)

Culture is the total way of life of a group of people that is learned, adaptive, shared, and integrated. It also could be called the pattern of this world, the way of life we learn to be conformed to through enculturation. This passage encourages us to become critical thinkers, especially with respect to our own culture. When the Holy Spirit renews our minds, we are better able to engage our culture critically rather than simply living from its values without even recognizing them. This won't lift us out of culture, but will move us toward living with wisdom and discernment, always testing what is good, pleasing, and perfect. How might we, as Christians, encourage critical engagement with our own culture? What about others' cultures?

Devotion 2

Culture as Part of God's Good Creation

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a

woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. (Gen. 2:18–25 NRSV)

Genesis 1 and 2 describe God's creation before the fall. In this passage, we see elements of social organization that anthropologists later would call "culture." Marriage and kinship are present in the relationships between Adam and Eve and their descendants. Work and leisure are portrayed in Adam and Eve's responsibility to steward and enjoy the garden. Even with a world of only two people, they needed culture: shared understandings and ways of life that would allow them to thrive as human beings. Genesis 3 presents the fall, and the impact of sin as pervasive in human culture from then up through the present. But God created culture as a context for human flourishing so that we may work toward its redemption and enjoy its goodness. How do we identify the ways in which our own cultures reflect the Fall? How do they reflect God's goodness in creation? How might we pursue the latter while seeking redemption of the former?

Language

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Compare and contrast historical linguistics, descriptive linguistics, and sociolinguistics.
2. Name the major theories of language in anthropology.
3. Describe the relationships between culture, language, and society.
4. Discuss the importance of language ideology in reading Scripture.

Introduction

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1–5 NRSV)

Jesus is called the "Word" (*logos*). God created the world by speaking it into existence. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit appeared as "tongues of fire," enabling the apostles to speak in the multiple languages of the people assembled in Jerusalem. Throughout Scripture, language and images of language are central to how God reveals truth and moves in the world. Therefore, it is not surprising that language is a fundamental element of human life as well.

Chapter Outline

Introduction
Historical Linguistics
Descriptive Linguistics
Language Theory
 Structuralism
 The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis
Sociolinguistics
 Social judgments of languages and dialects
 Multilingual societies
 Language contact, pidgins, and creoles
Language and Scripture