Introducing Cultural Anthropology
A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Brian M. Howell & Jenell Williams Paris
Contents

Preface vii

1. The Discipline of Anthropology 1
2. The Concept of Culture 25
3. Language 45
4. Social Structure and Inequality in Race, Ethnicity, and Class 65
5. Gender and Sexuality 87
6. Production and Exchange 107
7. Authority and Power 131
8. Kinship and Marriage 153
9. Religion and Ritual 175
10. Globalization and Culture Change 203
11. Theory in Cultural Anthropology 225
12. Anthropology in Action 247

Index 263
Preface

The Story of a Book

Some time ago, a colleague asked me (Brian) for resources that would help her teach the concept of culture to her French class. She was teaching about modern French film and wanted students to learn how terms like “popular culture” and “subculture” were distinct from “culture.” She also wanted her students to reflect on how Christians might engage film, literature, and other media in their society.

At the time, I knew of many resources written for secular colleges, and many aimed at professional anthropologists, but I could not offer her just what she needed: a book that would explain the culture concept in both academic and Christian terms, without assuming the reader has a professional anthropologist’s training for sorting through theoretical and technical issues.

After that conversation I envisioned authoring a short book—perhaps eighty pages—that would address the culture concept in Christian perspective. I even had a title: *Culture: A Primer for Christians*. Similar small booklets had been published by presses such as Oxford and others, and it seemed potentially useful for Christians teaching many subjects—even modern French film.

As my sabbatical approached, I revisited this idea, but now I imagined a slightly longer book—perhaps 120 pages—that would address a cluster of key topics in addition to culture. I wanted a coauthor, and was glad Jenell saw the value of the project for all the same reasons I did.

In the end, the project grew larger than our initial vision, from a modest primer to a more sizable textbook. When we approached Baker Academic, we pointed out that the anthropology textbooks written by and for Christians are now more than twenty years old. Although they had stood as excellent texts, it was time for something new that would speak to contemporary
audiences and incorporate current terminology, theory, and examples. We also pointed out that while anthropology has long had a strong relationship with foreign missions, it has grown in Christian higher education to support general education, cross-cultural ministry, anthropology (or anthropology and sociology) majors and minors, Teaching English as a Second Language programs, intercultural studies, and many other academic programs. There was a need for a textbook that presented anthropology as a discipline in its own right and not only as a tool to support foreign missions or other explicitly cross-cultural work.

About the Authors

Combined, we have taught Introduction to Anthropology for more than twenty years. We enjoy encountering new ideas (or revising good ones) with our students, and seeing students stretch their own sense of humanity, culture, and God. We see this book as an opportunity to share what we’ve learned in the classroom and to provide resources that encourage an even stronger presence of anthropology in Christian higher education. Although we came to anthropology through different paths (described below), we have both embraced our roles as teachers and see this book as an extension of that call.

Jenell Williams Paris

My areas of interest include urban anthropology, race, gender, and sexuality. My path to anthropology (partly described at the beginning of chap. 1) began as an undergraduate at Bethel University in Minnesota. In addition to majoring in sociocultural studies, I did a month of fieldwork in Amsterdam and a semester program in Washington, D.C., both of which exposed me to cultural diversity, urban life, and social science scholarship. I also spent two summers doing urban ministry in Philadelphia with KingdomWorks (now Mission Year), which was the strongest motivator for further studies in urban anthropology.

My dissertation research at American University was on political activism and community formation in a low-income neighborhood of Washington, D.C. Since then, I’ve continued to research race and poverty and have expanded my interests to include contraception, gender, and sexual identity. My articles and books have appeared in secular and Christian journals aimed at scholars, as well as magazines such as Christianity Today and newspapers such as the Los Angeles Times. Before this book, I published two others: one about urban ministry (Urban Disciples, coauthored with Margot Eyring), and one about birth control (Birth Control for Christians).
As a professor, throughout my nine years at Bethel University in Minnesota and now at Messiah College in Pennsylvania, I often mentor students in research and writing as well as in spiritual and personal growth. I want to connect my teaching, scholarship, mentoring, and calling as a public intellectual. This book is an important step in that journey.

**Brian M. Howell**

I have worked primarily in the areas of globalization, global Christianity, and, to a lesser extent, race and religion in the United States. As I tell in my own short biography at the beginning of chapter 1, I attended Wesleyan University in Connecticut, a good liberal arts school that has long since severed ties with its Christian past. While I got a wonderful education in social theory and economic history, there was little to help me connect my intellectual life with my faith. God provided one professor, Richard Elphick, a historian of South African Dutch missions, as a mentor. He modeled for me the life of a faithful Christian and rigorous scholar. Although God eventually drew me to anthropology rather than history, Professor Elphick showed me how important it is for Christians to connect the life of the mind with life in Christ.

Since earning a master’s degree at Fuller Seminary and then a PhD in anthropology from Washington University in Saint Louis, I have taught at Wheaton College in Illinois for nine years. Teaching anthropology in this setting provides the same joys and challenges my colleagues everywhere face. My students find anthropology inherently fascinating. It helps them to make sense of short-term mission experiences, multiculturalism, or their own backgrounds as missionary kids, ethnic minorities, or simply people who question cultural assumptions. In the face of a discipline that emphasizes cultural and social explanations, however, these very issues sometimes raise questions about the universality of faith or the nature of God. I have found no greater reward than helping students connect the insights of anthropology with their faith.

Like Jenell, my publishing has been in both the scholarly and popular venues. My books have addressed global Christianity, with my primary field site in Baguio City, Philippines. (Hence the many Philippine examples throughout the book!) In addition to global Christianity, my research has also been in areas of race in U.S. churches and short-term missions. I have enjoyed encouraging students in their own research and have even copublished with students in the past.

We both see this book as an opportunity to share what we have learned in the classroom and to provide a resource that encourages the development of anthropology in Christian colleges.
Using the Book

The book relies on a time-honored organizational schema. Chapters cover the aspects of culture and analytical categories common to the discipline and are grouped according to what some call “cultural subcategories.” The text could be taught in exactly the order in which the chapters present the material, corresponding to a standard U.S. semester. At the same time, the chapters make reference to one another, making it easy to teach or read the chapters in any order.

We kept the book midlength in order to keep it affordable for students and flexible for teachers. In reaching that goal, we left some areas of cultural anthropology less developed, such as cultural aspects of aesthetics and art, medical anthropology, and cross-cultural psychology. The material on theory and the history of the discipline could easily be twice as long. In maintaining a focus on cultural anthropology, the book’s treatment of biological anthropology and archaeology is, by necessity, cursory.

We anticipate professors using ethnographies, ethnographic film, and other primary sources to highlight particular areas of interest. With various topics, ethnographic and commercial (“Hollywood”) films can be used to highlight the concepts in the text.

Although it is primarily geared to an undergraduate course in introductory anthropology, the book also may contribute to mission courses about the history of mission, practical ministry, and ministry in both cross-cultural and domestic contexts. With devotional materials and Christian theology integrated throughout, it could serve as a helpful text for short-term mission preparation courses and cross-cultural ministry classes at local churches.

Imagining an Audience

Every author imagines who will read his or her book. This imaginary audience helps the author to choose the “voice” of the book, the examples to be used, and overall style. Every author hopes that many other people read the book as well, but it often helps the reader to know the primary audience the authors had in mind. In this case, both of us tended to picture our own students: undergraduates at Christian colleges in the United States. Many of our students are European American English speakers who were born and raised in the United States, but others are from various racial and ethnic groups. Others are international students pursuing college degrees in the United States, and some are the children of missionaries or military personnel who have lived most of their lives outside the United States. Some of our students are well-traveled and culturally conversant, while others have very little familiarity with cultural diversity.
Drawing on our experiences, we have worked into the text many of the questions and issues that have arisen for us throughout the years. Some relate to a Christian perspective, while others are more about the particular cultural background many of our students bring to the table. Because both of us have done the bulk of our teaching in the United States (and were both born and raised in the United States), the book’s examples tend to draw on U.S. cultural norms and practices. Many illustrations come from our lectures and from our students. Several ideas, ethnographic examples, and biblical explanations come from colleagues who have been kind enough to allow their words to appear here (with citation).

Many seminaries and colleges around the world offer courses in anthropology, of course, and we sincerely hope this book can be of service internationally. We hope the examples, though relative to the North American context, will be helpful for students everywhere as students and faculty adapt the book to various contexts through class discussions, lectures, films, and the like.

Acknowledgments and Thanks

This book has been encouraged along at several points and has benefited from the gracious help of many colleagues, students, and editors. We’re thankful to Baker Academic and Bob Hosack, in particular, for believing in the text and encouraging us in our work. I (Brian) especially appreciated his arranging a much-needed advance during my reduced-salary sabbatical. We were thrilled when the book quickly became collaborative, drawing on the expertise of Christian anthropology colleagues, many of whom are part of the Network of Christian Anthropologists. For expert review of chapter drafts and other contributions, we thank Miriam Adeney, Kevin Birth, Katrina Greene, Mike Jindra, Diane King, Sherwood Lingenfelter, Eloise Hiebert Meneses, Sue Russell, John Schaefer, Dan Shaw, Sarah Tobin, Christa Tooley, Todd Vanden Berg, and Steve Ybarolla. Special mention must go to Njeri Bene, who read two chapters and provided detailed editorial and substantive comments that were very helpful and much appreciated. For photographs, we thank Elinor Abbot, Dean Arnold, Jeff Deal, Calenthia Dowdy, Katerina Friesen, Katrina Greene, Tom Headland, Tony Kail, Adam Kis, Bruce Privratsky, John Schaefer, and Steve Ybarolla. For cartoon illustrations, we appreciate James Marohn’s artistry and generosity.

We relied on student assistance from Messiah College students Samantha Moore, Karli Davis, and Caitlin Kruse. Messiah College students in my (Jenell’s) Introduction to Cultural Anthropology courses in fall 2009 and spring 2010 tested the book, providing excellent critique.

Josh Walton, my (Brian’s) teaching assistant at Wheaton College, came to the project toward the end but read the entire manuscript and aided im-
messenly 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 dur-
ing 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.
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
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. 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

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.
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. 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.

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

---

Chapter 1

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. 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. 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. 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. 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

---

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

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. 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.

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. 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

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.”

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

The 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.”

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. After spending twenty-four years in New Caledonia as a Protestant missionary, Leenhardt took over the prestigious chair in social anthropology at the Ecole Practique 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

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...
Chapter 1

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

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. 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.

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.

**rapport**: 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.