

Imitating Christ in Magwi: An Anthropological Theology

Todd Whitmore

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In 2006, Joel Robbins' article "Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship?" argued that the newly emerging dialogue between anthropology and theology had transformative potential for both disciplines precisely because of the lessons that could arise through engaging with the differences between these fields of study.¹ In many ways, Todd Whitmore's book *Imitating Christ Magwi: An Anthropological Theology* is an answer to Robbins' call. Through his fieldwork in Uganda and South Sudan, Whitmore shows the creative insights and scholarship that can emerge when a scholar deeply embraces the productive tension between anthropology and theology. In doing so, Whitmore's book moves beyond interdisciplinary conversation to a truly interdisciplinary practice. This practice requires the engagement of the whole person—mind, body, and heart—and a refusal to separate academic inquiry from one's own personal commitments. The bulk of this review will focus on Whitmore's methodological approach and the challenge it presents to theologians and anthropologists. Before commenting on the theoretical framework of the book, it is important to note that Whitmore rejects the term "method" to describe his approach because his specific mode of inquiry arose in the process of doing fieldwork. He would, therefore, caution against simply replicating his approach as a different context might require more attention to different "moments or modalities" (28).

Whitmore opens with a story about an evening in Magwi, South Sudan when the conversation turned to discussing the best direction to run during a Lord's Resistance Army attack. By placing the reader in the middle of a story she may not be fully able to comprehend until later in the book, when more of the political context is given, Whitmore performs a key principle of his method—*in medias res*—locating one's self in the middle of things. As we move through the book, this being in the middle of things takes on a number of forms: Whitmore finds himself in the middle of people's lives in IDP camps; he is geographically caught in the middle of Uganda and the USA as he moves back and forth between places; he is academically between disciplines as his work seeks to engage both theology and anthropology; and finally he finds himself on the borderland between life and death when the spirit of Laker, a girl who died in Uganda, visits him in the USA. Whitmore describes this "being in the middle of things" as an experience of dislocation. The givens of his disciplinary training and his cultural and religious formation in the USA are radically disrupted. Yet it is precisely in the midst of this disruption that new possibilities can emerge.

By placing the reader *in medias res* at various points during the book, Whitmore invites the reader to also experience this dislocation.

Yet Whitmore's approach is not disruption for disruption's sake, but for the purpose of new, creative possibilities. As such, Whitmore does not leave us *in medias res*, but rather offers four signposts for the journey. The first is *attention*, which means attending to the world with our whole person. Both body and mind are engaged in the act of knowing. The second is *discernment*—carefully considering what we have noticed when we have paid attention and what parts of our own lens may need to change as a result. The third is *commitment*—choosing to fully inhabit what we have discerned, even if that has a social or economic cost. Finally, *return*—this is where we ask what it means to live out this commitment in the context of our home community. The book itself is organized around these signposts, taking us through the missionary history of Uganda, Whitmore's fieldwork with the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu (Northern Uganda), and finally his return to Notre Dame's campus.

One key principle that is essential to Whitmore's anthropological theology is mimetic scholarship as a practice of apprenticeship. Whitmore's work with the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu is an apprenticeship in imitating Christ. It is through participating in the daily life of the sisters and taking on their practice of caring for the vulnerable that Whitmore himself develops a new way of seeing. Knowledge, here, is not merely the analysis of fieldnotes and interviews, but also the physical embodiment of a set of transformative practices. Whitmore is clear that this mimetic practice is not about becoming a "copy." The sisters imitate Christ but are not Christ. Whitmore imitates the sisters but in important ways is clearly not a sister. This imitation is interpretation, not replication. Yet while the gap between self and other remains, it narrows through shared practice.

Whitmore's commitment to apprenticeship challenges some mainstream practices in both anthropology and theology. With regards to anthropology, Whitmore's work critiques ethnographic approaches that are committed to objectivity and, therefore, require the ethnographer to maintain distance with the community she is researching so as to "remain unchanged" by her engagement with them (25). Instead, Whitmore embraces Nancy Scheper-Hughes' ethnographic work, which explicitly blends activism with anthropology.² Whitmore also challenges the primacy of texts as the main source for scholarship in academic theology. He argues that a commitment to the incarnation requires a re-centering of persons and their faith practices as a primary site for theological reflection. Moving beyond textual scholarship would require theologians to privilege lived experience in their work as well as expand the types of methods typically used for theological research.

This scholarship signals possible fruitful partnerships with peace studies that others could take up in the future. The "local turn" in peace studies has embraced centering the perspectives and initiatives of local populations in peacebuilding. Peace scholars and practitioners could benefit from ethnographies like Whitmore's that capture not only some of the daily peacebuilding work of the sisters but also attend to their underlying motivations. If theological ethnographers were to take up sustained engagement with peace studies, they might spend time mapping local networks, compare the motivations of foreign relief workers with the local community, and attend to differing visions of peace and justice that local and international actors hold. Bringing theological ethnography into conversation with peace studies could offer a way to

attend to the religious perspectives of local communities engaged in peace work, while also guarding against the instrumentalization of religion.

While there are many strengths of this approach, it is worth briefly discussing a minor concern. In chapter four, Whitmore explains that one of the values of his work for theology is that the communities he studies in Uganda and South Sudan can be a “bridge culture.” By this, he means that since these communities inhabit a magical worldview in which, for example, spirits are active agents, it brings us closer to the worldview of first century Palestine, in which Jesus was embedded. While this is not Whitmore’s intent, there is a potential danger if this translates into theological ethnographers prioritizing fieldwork based on the “closeness” of that culture’s worldview to the biblical text. This could unintentionally create a hierarchy of field sites determined by “experts” in which those locations deemed closest to the worldview of the gospels, such as rural villages in Palestine, would be placed at the top of the hierarchy as spaces of theological insight, followed by other places which bear some resemblance to the ancient Near East. Yet, Whitmore himself provides the resources for attending to this potential danger. As discussed earlier, Whitmore emphasizes that mimesis is always an interpretation and not a copy of the original. Emphasis on mimetic practices avoids creating a hierarchy of particular cultural spaces and instead allows the ethnographer to attend to sites of *imitatio christi* across multiple spatial locations.

To conclude with Whitmore’s theme of return and the challenge it brings to his readers: in the final chapter, Whitmore asks what it means to bring what he learned from the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu back to Notre Dame. Here, Whitmore compares the daily risks the sisters took to imitate Christ to the risk management that characterizes the university. For example, he notes how he was asked not to publish an article on the genocide in Uganda because it might put Notre Dame’s service programs in Uganda “at risk.” He further comments on how risk management is a driving force behind marketing the Notre Dame brand in a way that ensures the financial security of the university. Whitmore thinks this ethic of risk management is not specific to Notre Dame but is true for most academic institutions. Part way through this analysis Whitmore provocatively asks what would happen if Jesus came today and overturned the tables selling Notre Dame gear before a football game. He concludes that Jesus would be arrested by the campus police. These examples raise some challenging questions: When universities prioritize risk management and the promotion of their brand, is there space for prophetic witness? Do the structures of academia itself prevent faithful imitation of Christ?

While Whitmore is critiquing the overarching structures and practices of academia more broadly, he is also challenging (Christian) theologians in particular, who have a specific commitment to attending to the ethical significance of the incarnation. Are we willing to be like the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu who renounced their wealth for the sake of service? Will we take academic risks for the sake of justice, even if it might cost us a job or tenure? The final pages of the book place us *in medias res* again as Whitmore presents two narratives simultaneously, each taking up one column of the page. One side of the page is the narrative account of the daily risks one of the sisters took to imitate Christ. On the other side is an academic account of theology and gospel mimesis. The reader is forced to go back and forth between the two narratives, creating an experience of dislocation in the toggling back and forth between

two worlds. This dislocation is an invitation to each of us to call into question the norms of our discipline and the norms of the academy and ask if we are, like the Little Sisters, willing to take on the risk of *imitatio Christi*.

Marie-Claire Klassen
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Notes

1. Joel Robbins, "Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship?" *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (2006): 285-294.
2. For more on this topic see: Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology," in *Anthropology in Theory: Issues in Epistemology*, eds. Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 506-512.