



Studying ... Anthropology and Archaeology

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It's fun... but there are no jobs!

When you say you study Archaeology or Anthropology people usually respond with, "Wow, that sounds really interesting – what is it"? Alternatively, since the days of *Time Team* and *Meet the Ancestors*, people assume archaeology is a three day digging race or an Indiana Jones style adventure.

Archaeology and Anthropology are intriguing and wide ranging subjects, which provide cross-cultural, comparative perspectives on the world, both past and present. This can be a very enriching experience and most of us who take these subjects enjoy the slightly exotic and alternative experiences of digs, travel and fieldwork as well as a quirky or alternative university persona! It's something we do because we love it. However, it's not all hunky-dory as most of us know. There really are very few jobs, not much money and no clear 'vocation' at the end of your studies. Furthermore, there are very few Christians in these fields and the departments tend to be small, intense environments of heavy drinking, smoking and parties. It's good to be prepared to face challenges, both practically and intellectually. So, what should one expect to encounter if studying these courses?

Creation is Creative

Firstly, be prepared to be fascinated, shocked and intrigued by the multiplicity of ways in which people have constructed and lived their lives throughout history, worldwide. One of the main blessings and enjoyments of these subjects is the exposure to such a wide range of ideas, artefacts, places and people. This is a privilege we should

not take lightly as it makes us marvel in the inherently creative nature of the world and people that God has made.

However, being a Christian anthropologist or archaeologist also raises some pretty difficult questions. Questions that not only challenge us to think about cross-cultural issues, but also challenge our faith in a number of ways, not least through realizing how culturally determined so much of our knowledge and experience actually is. Specifically, some of the areas that you might need to think about as a Christian archaeologist or anthropologist are the central tenets of these disciplines: cultural relativism, human evolution and the role of the material world in constructing human identity.

Values and Morals

Cultural relativism is a belief that '*all cultural diversity, including morality, is relative to the culture in which it occurs and that no ethical or moral pattern ought to be universally applied to all cultures*' (Arnold 2006, 272). This means that one cannot make value judgments or declare that any cultural practice is right or wrong. All practices and beliefs, whether shocking to a Westerner or not, are said to 'make sense' within the society that they are located. Such views cause problems for Christians. Christianity is an ultimate truth claim with an absolute framework for morality located in the character and commands of a personal God. How do we square our belief in such a claim with studying a subject that inherently denies the validity of such claims?

Although this is still a central belief in subjects like multicultural studies, since the 1970s and the Vietnam War, the American Anthropological Association created a Code of Ethics which has somewhat tempered such an extreme, relativistic view, particularly with the rise of 'Human Rights', the protection of indigenous groups and the perceived importance of the distribution of western medicines.

Mission

Another area that we must think about as Christians studying anthropology is the presence of missionaries in indigenous societies. Many anthropologists decry the work of missionaries, accusing them of Western cultural imperialism and being guilty of speeding the detrimental

effects of globalization. As Christians we need to think about how mission and evangelical activities are perceived by our fellow anthropologists - it will be sure to come up in conversations! We must separate in our own minds the spreading of the gospel *into* other societies (which can continue to maintain many of their cultural traditions that are not in direct conflict with their new found faith), without seeing the spreading of Christianity as the need to impose *our own cultural versions of what Christianity should look like*.

Engaging with Evolution

Another thing to be prepared for is the debate on the evolutionary origins of humans. This is already a highly contentious issue amongst Christians, with orthodox believers holding vastly different opinions. In this case it is crucial not to approach the subject with prejudices or a closed mind, but to truly examine the arguments being put forward in your lectures, the core readings and by Christians in both 'camps'. Familiarize yourself with the assumptions and perspectives of all sides. Test the evidence to come to your own conclusions and if you can't come to a conclusion remain humble and open to the possibility of having more convincing evidence one way or the other later on. Holding an opinion either way can run you into difficult places of both a scientific or theological nature. It is important to ask yourself honest questions as to your position. Don't just hold on to opinions passed down to you second hand.

The Power of the Material

Finally, prepare yourself to be surrounded by things! Artefacts form the basis of archaeological study (and a lot of anthropology too). Archaeology emphasizes the importance of objects, images, architecture, landscape and space in the creation of not only cultural, but personal, human identities. Not only that; material culture is put forward as *the* defining element of human experience - of self and collective understanding. Much of this is true and we need to be prepared to realize this. Your experience of living as a young adult in 21st century England surrounded by ipods, motorways, Starbucks, cars and fiberglass is going to be very different from someone living in the Kalahari desert or the Highlands of New Guinea now or 3,000 years ago in Siberia or Central Europe! Our cultures do construct our experiences. We are what we make...

to an extent....

BUT...

As Christians we believe that we are part of God's created, material world but we are different from it in one essential way – we are made in his image. Because of this our identities as individuals and societies as a whole are not reducible to a purely cultural or materially constructed nature. We are a combination of body and spirit, not simply the products of our cultural and ecological environment.

How to approach it!

Be honest, sincere, interested and open! Try to think about the cultural assumptions your Christian background has instilled in you and separate the content of your doctrine and faith from its cultural form. The message of the cross speaks across and through vastly differing cultures. Make sure you pray and get support from Christians who might be dealing with similar questions in social sciences, humanities or human biology so that you can encourage and support each other. As Christian anthropologists we understand all of human society, culture and history as fitting within the bigger picture of God's redemptive plan for humanity. Therefore, human culture and society, past and present, displays God-given human creativity but also sinfulness, perversion and brokenness. We need to look for God's truth wherever it can be found in the world, past and present. Ultimately, this is expressed in Christ in the Bible, but we can continue to learn wonderful things about God and His character by exploring His creation, which though terribly distorted by sin, is what He loves and has died to rescue.

And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth." Revelation 5:9-10

Resources

There are very few Christians organizations for students studying 'Arch and Anth' in the UK. However, there is a Christian Anthropologist network in the states, which largely consists of a cyber-community and a few periodic events (see <https://lists.bethel.edu/mailman/listinfo/fishnet>).

There are some good resources on general issues like Evolution, Relativism and Materialism as seen on bethinking.org.

The following books and articles might also be of help:

*Helpful article by a Christian Anthropologist Dean Arnold titled: 'Why Are There So Few Christian Anthropologists? Reflections on the Tensions between Christianity and Anthropology'. *Perspectives on Science & Christian Faith* Volume 58, No. 4 December 2006.

You can access this online at: <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2006/PSCF12-06Arnold.pdf>.

**Can We Believe in Genesis Today?* By Ernest Lucas (IVP, 2005).

A book looking at all the recent arguments for and against Creationism, Theistic Evolution, etc.

**Meltdown: Making Sense of a Culture in Crisis* By Marcus Honeysett (Kregel Publications, 2005).