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# Whither and Whence the Anthropology of Christianity?

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My own entry into anthropology came in 1994, when I attended the American Anthropological Association annual meeting in Atlanta. I was looking for a graduate program where I could study Christianity, but I was not interested in missions, or contact, or colonialism per se. I was interested in studying the ways Christianity intersected with local understandings of ethnic/cultural identity, and, more broadly, as a study of global-local dynamics, by understanding how adherence to a religion of global reach would reshape local understandings of cultural emplacement. There was no entry for Christianity, Catholicism, or Pentecostalism in the index. There were, at those meetings, no panels in which the term “Christianity” appeared. There were fewer than 10 papers, which, by the title, indicated a topic addressing Christians or Christianity, most of these coming from a two-part panel on Missionaries and Human Rights. Compare that to the upcoming 2014 meetings in D.C., where there are over 50 sessions and 140 papers in which Christianity or some subset, such as Pentecostalism, is in the title. Thus, in 1994, for anyone looking for a program to Christianity, programs were few and far between.



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I ended up at Washington University to work with John Bowen, a scholar of Indonesian Islam, who was interested in question of religious change among large-scale religions in local context, and could support my interest in Southeast Asia, as I turned my attention to the Philippines. It was a fine choice, but there was no doubt that in terms of writing on Christianity, I was going to have to do a lot of my own work to find a way through. What had yet to appear was what Joel Robbins would later call anthropology of Christianity *of itself for itself*.

In 2003, Robbins guest edited a special issue of the journal *Religion*, and wrote a now widely cited introduction for it in which he called for the production of an anthropology of Christianity that would work in a way analogous to the anthropology of Islam. That is, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, work on Islam as it was practiced and translated into the local settings in which it was found around the world had been read by a group of scholars working in very different parts of the world, but recognizing each other's work as belonging to a single body of literature. For a variety of reasons, that had not yet occurred with the study of Christianity, but that was all about to change.

Robbins own book on Pentecostals in Papua New Guinea appeared in 2004. Fenella Cannell's edited book from Duke University Press, titled simply the *Anthropology of Christianity*, appeared in 2006. These two works were important for drawing together the work that already existed, and setting out a path for what would come. Cannell's introduction to her edited volume has done as much as anyone to set the agenda for the anthropology of Christianity as it was written and read throughout the decade from 2000 to 2010. At the center of her chapter was the question she posed, "What difference does Christianity make?" She meant it in several senses: What difference does it make for those who call themselves Christians? Also, what difference does it make for anthropology to investigate Christianity as an anthropological object?

Around the first question, it became clear that the difference Christianity was thought to make, or not make, had a great deal to do with the kind of Christianity an anthropologist chose to engage, and how he or she chose to engage it. As I

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argued in 2003, Pentecostalism has long taken a great deal of the anthropological lime-light, perhaps due to its vibrant growth, elaborated ritual life, or presence (if not dominance) in the places where anthropologists like to work. For instance, Pentecostalism has brought out the notion that Christianity leads to rupture in which converts, and even second or third generation Pentecostals, conceive of their lives in terms of how they represent a complete break with the past (Meyer 1999, Robbins 2007). It has likewise shaped the

theory of conversion itself around the kinds of conversion to modernity or modernities, as Peter van der Veer titled his 1996 volume.

But those studying other forms of Christianity have often argued for different differences. Those working among Orthodox or post-missionary denominational Christianity, the difference that Christianity makes has been interpreted as less about Christianity *per se* than the transnational economic or political contexts they tend to bring with them (Hann 2007, Comaroff 2010). In addition, Christianity as such, as Michael Scott and Matt Tomlinson have argued from the perspective of the South Pacific, may only make a difference as it provides material for the cultural innovations that are always going on everywhere (Scott 2005, Tomlinson 2007).

Similarly, whether Christianity makes a difference and what kind of difference it might make is deeply influenced by the kind of anthropology brought to the party. Those working in the vein of cultural anthropology, such as Robbins or my own work come to see Christianity making a different difference than those such as Tanya Luhrmann or Tom Csordas working in psychoanalytic or phenomenological approaches.

But in spite of the variation – which has led various scholars to speak of Christianities rather than Christianity – the anthropology of Christianity has produced the kind of body of literature analogous to the anthropology of Islam, where this wide variety of anthropological approaches, working in a wide variety of geographic, cultural, and historical contexts, speaks to and about itself, generating significant theoretical insights that are picked up for use elsewhere in anthropology.

### **Contributions to the Discipline from/to the anthropology of Christianity**

If the ethnographic question of what difference Christianity makes has been variously answered in myriad ways, the second meaning of the question – What difference it makes to the discipline of anthropology – is more speculative. In this realm it cannot always be said that it was the anthropology of Christianity that pushed a new idea into the fore, but there are a few themes that have emerged more directly from anthropologists of Christianity.

One conversation that has gotten some traction has been the question of how Christianity contributes to construction of selves. Joel Robbins, a prominent voice in the anthropology of Christianity and a Melanesianist, famously stated in his book *Becoming Sinners* that Christianity is “unrelentingly individualist.” Mark Mosko, whose work among the Bush Mekeo people of PNG stretched back to the mid-1980s, challenged these views of Christianity and Christians as “individualist,” arguing that among the Melanesian societies the more productive understanding had been that of the “dividual,” or the partible person. Although this particular exchange only appeared in print in 2010, scholars in other regions

such as Amazonia (Vilaça 2011), have picked up the conversation. Aparecida Vilaça published on the constitution of personhood among the Wari' of Ecuadorian Amazonia, reflecting specifically on this conversation between Mosko and his interlocutors. Naomi Haynes (2007), and several others have likewise picked up the conversations about Christianity and personhood as key elements of their work.

The Anthropology of Christianity has also become a significant part of some other ongoing conversations. Cannell, (2010) from her work on Christianity as a cultural form, has also made significant contributions to the anthropology of secularism. In 2010 she was asked to do the Annual Review essay on the Anthropology of Secularism, in which she declares herself a “skeptic” of secularism. Like her earlier work critiquing the formation of anthropological theory as, like Asad’s critique of Geertz, having an implicit Christian form, she explores secularism has having a religion-like genealogy and structure that cause it to privilege the political over the religious (as defined over and against the secular political.)

Arguably, the most significant theoretical contributions to anthropology from the anthropology of Christianity have come in the conversation about rupture and continuity. One of the works often cited in this conversation is Brigit Meyer’s 1999 monograph *Translating the Devil*. Although this was significantly a study of missionization and conversion, this work, along with much of Meyer’s research on Ghanaian Pentecostalism, served as one of the earlier examples of anthropology inquiring into the nature of Christianity as a cultural form in and for itself, rather than as an opportunity to inquire into some other social, cultural, political or economic process.

Joel Robbins likewise studied Pentecostals (and in his case, Pentecostals who did *not* have a direct missionary influence) who understood themselves as having broken from their past. He focused on this ethnographic datum as a point of theoretical interest in 2007 with a *Current Anthropology* article entitled “Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture: Belief, Time and the Anthropology of Christianity.” Perhaps more than any other particular theoretical formulation coming from the anthropology of Christianity, the question of anthropology’s commitment to “continuity thinking” has traveled to a number of conversations in the wider discipline. While the vast majority of articles and books citing Robbins’ work have likewise addressed aspects of Christianity, it also appears in research on Islam and other major religions, the concept of time (Nielsen 2011), and the general disciplinary dimensions of anthropology (Pina-Cabral 2010; Comaroff 2010).

### **Whither the Anthropology of Christianity**

As there are a number of articles providing an overview of the anthropology of Christianity, I’ll stop there with what I see to be some of the major themes and

contributions from the literature (e.g., Bialecki, Haynes, and Robbins 2008; Jenkins 2012). Let me turn now to the question of where the anthropology of Christianity seems to be going and pick up on a few emerging themes that seem to be characterizing some of the folks who have been deeply embedded in the conversations about Christianity.

It is not surprising that those interested in Christianity, or any religious formation, would find themselves equally and simultaneously drawn into the study of moralities. Several important monographs in the anthropology of Christianity (e.g., Robbins 2004) along with many significant articles (e.g., Haynes 2012) take morality to be the launching point for the argument, and central to the analysis of Christian life. Like the theme of morality and ethics that has been prominent in the anthropology of Islam, the study of ethical monotheism in any form will bring morality into ethnographic relief. It is perhaps only surprising that it has took nearly a decade for the anthropologies of Christianity and morality to more obviously converge.

James Laidlaw, in a 2002 article on the anthropology of ethics, or lack thereof, argued that “Durkheim’s conception of the social so completely identifies the collective with the good that an independent understanding of ethics appears neither necessary nor possible. There is no conceptual space for it” (2002:312) This would also apply to how religion, particularly the religion most “explained” by Durkheimian structuralism, would likewise disappear from the theoretical landscape. Both religion and morality were explained away as subsets of social action, interesting not in their own right, but only as they revealed underlying social logic. Both Christianity and ethics escaped from such elision in their own ways, but now they seem to be coming together in interesting ways.

In a fascinating article published just this year in the *Journal of Religious Ethics*, UCLA anthropologist Yunxiang Yan (2014) explores the understanding of immorality developing in China. In the midst of a rapidly changing economic order, and social dislocation due to mobility and social change, a new concern over ethics has emerged in China, particularly around the phenomenon of the “Good Samaritan.” While Yan does not interrogate this use of the biblical phrase “good Samaritan” in the public and scholarly work on the phenomenon, it raises questions about the role of Christian morality, and even Christian theology, on an emerging discourse of the good (and evil) in Chinese society. This suggests a moment of emergence and convergence in these streams of inquiry.

Conversations about morality connect to what Webb Keane has called the “affordances” of Christianity, or positions supplied by Christianity from which Christians can make claims, be they moral, ontological or theological (see Haynes forthcoming). Naomi Haynes elaborates this in her upcoming afterward to a special issue of *Current Anthropology* on the anthropology of Christianity. She notes that these affordances provide both material for the articulation of

value, as well as limits on the ways those values are conceptualized and subsequently articulated and contested.

Another area more wholly emerging from the anthropology of Christianity is a concerted effort to bring anthropology together with theology in newly productive ways. Like the anthropology of ethics, this is not a conversation that began with the Anthropology of Christianity, but unlike ethics, the discussion about theology has taken a very different turn as a consequence of the confluence.

Joel Robbins (2006) published a piece in *Anthropological Quarterly* in 2006, arguing that anthropology and theology have “an awkward relationship” (jumping off an article by Marilyn Strathern in which she took a similar tack on the relationship of anthropology and feminism). He suggested that the ways theologians are able to conceive of otherness should pose a challenge for anthropologists to reclaim our ability to consider radical otherness as a real possibility. What he did not do was argue that theology had significant resources for anthropology to use in the work of understanding otherness (or thinking about the nature of otherness.)

Notably, Robbins and a number of others have interacted substantially with John Milbank, a theologian and founder of “Neo-orthodoxy,” which has collected theologians around the conviction that social science represents the disenchanting moral philosophy of the past, pushing aside theological understandings of humanity for purely secularized ones. Milbank and his ilk have advocated a rejection of social scientific concepts for purely ecclesial and theological ones. This strong program of theologically rooted social analysis, has attracted a fair bit of attention from anthropologists. Perhaps because his position is such an exclusive one, coming from a theologian with extensive knowledge of social theory, his work has engaged anthropologists in an expanding conversation about the possibilities for rapprochement between theological and anthropological work.

Recently, several theologically committed anthropologists have begun to push the question of how these theological concepts, even those with explicitly sectarian origin and context, could become part of an anthropological agenda. These are more recent ventures, so where they’ll go is unknown, but they have begun to receive institutional support that suggests they have some added importance in wider conversations.

## **Conclusion**

Philip Fountain, an anthropologist at Singapore National University, has recently called for the development of a “post-secular anthropology” to emerge from the fruitful conversation of theology and anthropology (Fountain 2013). Eloise Meneses, with her collaborators at Eastern University (full disclosure, I have become one of those collaborators), is likewise pursuing a project of linking

Christian theology with anthropological categories and analysis through a Templeton funded project called "On Knowing Humanity." Recently, Derrick Lemons (2014), an anthropologist teaching in the

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Religious Studies department of the University of Georgia has likewise launched a project to develop a more fully orbbed “theologically-engaged theoretical framework for the field of the anthropology of religion.” While these serious efforts will push the project along, it will take a generation of scholars who can work in various frameworks of theology while navigating developing conceptions of the secular and secularism. At the same time, it strikes me that Fountain is right to suggest that anthropology is moving into a post-secular era. Although I can’t say that I have maintained links to the anthropology of Islam as I have moved into the anthropology of Christianity, it may be that there remain instructive lessons there for how the anthropology of Christianity may develop in the future. I have no doubt that in whatever is to come, there will be a flourishing of theoretical and ethnographic work as a new generations of scholars come into their own.

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