

Reassessing Christian Mission as an Anthropological Study Object

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This article proposes how and why academic anthropology should repair its accidental relationship to Christian mission. The short version is that this will benefit anthropology by bringing it out of stifled stereotypes. It will likewise benefit theology by bringing sociocultural insights to its doorstep for serious consideration. For this to happen, mutual respect and trust need to be cultivated. Such intentions lie at the heart of an ongoing research project of revisiting the evolvement of the Lutheran church in Mbulu, northern Tanzania.

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The Anti-Imperialistic Concern

The classic hallmark of anthropological research is the cultural relativistic method, by which the researcher tries to avoid one's subjective notions and opinions from distorting the understanding of the object of study. Although epistemological critiques arise from time to time questioning whether this is fully achievable,¹ securing the representation of indigenous worlds on their own terms remains a paramount anti-imperialistic and ethical aim. Religion is arguably the arena where the relativistic stance is put to its greatest test. In the face of the deeply ingrained mind-set of Western academics to relegate most things religious to the realm of irrationality and superstition, the willingness to seriously represent non-Western religious thought and practices are laudable and empathetic endeavours.²

As to the study of Christianity, how-

ever, the relativistic methodology has largely been eclipsed by a higher purpose; which is precisely the anti-imperialistic concern. This is because the spreading of Christianity has generally been associated with external impositions upon indigenous worlds, and with the primary change agents, the missionaries, often portrayed in derogatory and even antagonistic terms.³ In a monograph from Tanzania, for instance, tellingly titled *Colonial Evangelism*, T.O. Beidelman suggested that Christian mission is in fact of the "worst colonial kind" because it "aim[s] for the most far-reaching domination, attacking the most deeply held traditional beliefs and values."⁴

A number of studies have been produced in which researchers have directly or indirectly complained about the spreading of Christianity.⁵ The "Western" religion has increasingly been "spoiling" traditional societies, and people have mostly

converted for other reasons than spiritual ones; being, for instance, "Indians with White pretensions"⁶ etc. It ought not to surprise anyone that such kind of anthropology has generated suspicion and distrust among Christians.⁷ When a scholar such as Raymond Firth, for instance, concludes that "[T]o an anthropologist such as myself, therefore, religion, including ideas of God, is clearly a human construct",⁸ the only available perspective is reductionistic, that is; to reduce all religious phenomena to this-worldly, socio-cultural origins and variables. I have met sceptical church leaders who distrust the relativistic method, characterizing it as nothing more than "fictitious respect" if it ultimately denies the existence of the divine anyway. They subsequently write academic anthropology off as counterproductive, irrelevant, and useless.⁹

Curiously enough perhaps, many missionaries, mission agencies, and missionary educational institutions have actually embraced anthropological insights and methods for being useful tools for improving the quality of their engagement with indigenous populations. It is, however, defined as a *Christian* anthropology, clearly premised on the right to do mission work. As early as 1952, a group of missionary scholars initiated the publication of *Practical Anthropology*, meant to provide hands-on ethnographic field research tools. (The journal eventually evolved into *Missiology*, which today is an ecumenical journal recognized and respected across many Christian denominations.) Some missionary scholars have earned academic distinction and respect beyond their church environments.¹⁰ Mostly, however, "missionary anthropology" has been frowned upon and dismissed by academia as conditioned by and subservient to a larger purpose;¹¹ - equaled to the ra-

ther infamous social scientists who worked in the colonial service charged with providing useful information about the "natives".

Like any science, the anthropological discipline should in principle be free to deliberate on anything it chooses without taking into consideration whether people or entities being studied are happy with the findings or not. Critical scientific freedom needs, however, to be balanced with a healthy dose of epistemological reflexivity; with the scientist's self-critical assessment of his/her ability to represent the Other truthfully. Ironically, the anti-imperialistic crusader may easily turn anthropology into yet another tool of dominance if he/she keeps (re)producing imageries that the objects of study see as misrepresentations of themselves. An important nuance, for instance, which has generally lacked in the anthropological studies of Christian mission, is the inability or unwillingness to separate critical analysis of mission work from consideration of the missionaries as persons.¹² We need to appreciate that even if a lot of missionary activity may be analyzed as ultimately playing into colonial purposes, the missionaries did not regard themselves as instruments of colonialism.

Critical science should ultimately be useful. Insights gained ought to contribute towards amending or bettering what is being criticized. Usefulness does not come by itself, however, but is connected to notions of trustworthiness and to earning the right to be listened to. It is the recipients' privilege to grant that trust. Trust building develops along at least two important lines; the social and the epistemological. Generally, people being studied will quickly sense and respond positively when they are treated with respect and empathy. They will be willing to listen

even more if they see that their fundamental premises for acting in the world are being understood. The missionaries' *raison d'être* is the notion of being called to undertake a divinely mandated enterprise.

A New Anthropology of Christianity

In recent years, a new anthropology has been emerging, which intentionally tries to transcend old imperialistic imageries. It tries to take seriously the fact that an *indigenization* of Christianity is taking place on the old mission fields, where new generations of faithful are oblivious to the historical connections to Western mission.¹³ Bringing anthropology out of its old paternalisms by paying serious attention to emic sensibilities is important for both ethical and methodological reasons. Even if local people should still convert to the Christian faith because of its connotations to the Western world and modernization, there is a difference between portraying them as victims of foreign imposition and as active protagonists in their own life stories. More important still, an anthropological vindicating of Christianity as a socio-cultural fact in indigenous societies opens new spaces of research, which ultimately widens and enriches *anthropology*. The study of cultural continuity amidst discourses of radical change, which is often expected in religious conversion, is a case in point. Joel Robbins deserves special credit for advocating and nurturing "anthropology of Christianity" as a critical and respectable academic field, as evidenced by the monographs in the Anthropology of Christianity Series published by the University of California Press.

Perhaps the least controversial kind of study is to explore how local communities and population groups embrace

Christianity on their own terms and develop their own hybrid versions.¹⁴ Such an angle falls in well with the "answering back"-discourse of post-colonialist literature. The so-called African Independent Churches have drawn attention for establishing themselves in opposition to Western Christianity and for displaying rich syncretism. Far more challenging is to study a foreign missionary project by way of *both* acknowledging the missionaries' emic point of view and maintaining an analytical and critical distance. Besides, little anthropological research has been done on churches that have evolved rather silently and un-dramatically out of their Western origins and have found their place within the historic denominations. The conservative Lutheran church in Mbulu is such a case.

Garriott and O'Neill¹⁵ try to transcend the accidental and awkward relationship between anthropology and theology by developing what they call a "dialogic approach". While treating church people and believers with increased empathy and respect, their method remains cultural relativism. Some missionaries and church leaders understand that it is beyond anthropology's traditional competence to dwell on metaphysical claims, and accept that, at any rate, the cultural relativistic method can contribute valid insights into empirical evolvments, irrespective of where some elements originate ontologically. Yet, to others, that is not enough.¹⁶ The question to consider is, therefore, to what extent anthropology can accept and incorporate the existence of, and the intervention of divine agency in this world, without compromising its academic independence.

This question is being raised because of the need to continue the dialogue with the mission and church sector - not only

in order to amend relations with previously stigmatized research subjects, but also in order to explore how anthropology can contribute towards the theological understanding of questions such as the relationship between faith and culture.

A Lutheran Mission in a Multi-Ethnic Setting

I will intend to explore this possibility by way of doing an anthropological study of the emergence and development of the Lutheran church in Mbulu district in northern Tanzania. Several anthropological studies have already been done in Mbulu, and some have touched on the presence of the Lutheran work in the area. Although the mission has never been subject to any specific study, anthropologists have provided data about effects of its work, which provide valuable insights that my research project builds on.

Mbulu is unique in being the only area in Africa where the four main language groups meet;¹⁷ the Cushitic group represented by the agropastoralist Iraqw, the Nilotic family represented by the pastoralist and semi-nomadic Datoga, Bantu groups such as the agropastoralists Isanzu, Nyaturu, and Iramba bordering the region to the south, and the Khoisan-speaking hunter-gatherers Hadzabe. A pressing question to explore from an anthropological point of view, for example, is how a mission goes about trying to encompass and include in its fold such a diversity of languages and ethnic groups. Today, 70 years since the mission commenced its work, we find that the ethnic representation within the church is very uneven. Did the mission try to reach the various groups differently, or did a standardized approach happen to benefit one group more than the others?

The starting point of the Lutheran pre-

sence in the Mbulu region was an area called Dongobesh. It had for quite some time been inhabited by the Gisemjanga clan of the Datoga people, and in 1927, in line with the Indirect Rule policy of the British colonial government, a Gisemjanga elder was named chief. By working through local headmen, Indirect Rule was first of all a pragmatic system designed to simplify and lessen administrative expenses. It had, however, also an ideological side to it by ensuring a certain amount of "tribal" self-rule with the intention of preventing Africans from turning into "bad European copies".¹⁸ This policy was wrought with relativity and ambiguities. It gradually became overshadowed by European colonial notions of superiority and the urge to intervene in local affairs, in order to "civilize the natives".

Dongobesh was a hotspot of this new development. A new set of British administrators were in full process of reconstructing the ethnogeography of the Mbulu area according to their superimposed cultural notions of cultural development¹⁹ by the time the Swedish Lutheran mission (Evangeliska Forsterlandsstiftelsen) entered the area, in 1939. As agriculturalists, the Iraqw were considered the most "developed" people, ranked above the "wild" Datoga, not to speak of the "very wild" Hadzabe. The Iraqw were thus projected to be a promising people to be emulated by the others. Socio-cultural and economic development, the British thought, would mainly be engineered by encouraging the Iraqw to expand territorially and to settle in areas traditionally held by other groups such as the Gisemjanga in Dongobesh. Encouraging mixed marriages was also among the tactics that would get the "amalgamation" strategy going.²⁰

In principle, the Swedish mission

aimed at "reaching all people for Christ" regardless of ethnicity etc. In practice, according to reports and correspondences, the missionaries likewise endeared themselves to the Iraqw.²¹ They were considered to be more sympathetic, development-minded, and interested in the mission and its services such as school and health clinic. The Datoga were projected in contrast to this. They were seen to be introvert and stubborn, bearers of unacceptable cultural notions and practice such as polygamy, and for young men to kill members of neighboring people groups in order to prove manhood. Factors such as the increasing numerical presence of Iraqw immigrants in the area, offers of employment opportunities and leadership positions within the church, a Iraqw literacy and bible translation project initiated by the Swedes, combined to reinforce the evolvement of an Iraqw dominated church.

With the incursion of agriculturalists, many Datogo pastoralists simply moved to new grazing areas. The few that remained in Dongobesh settled there through intermarriage or other social commitments, picked up agriculture, became bilingual, and gradually re-identified themselves as Iraqw.

The Swedish mission project was handed over to the Norwegian Lutheran Mission (Norsk Luthersk Misjonsamband) in 1950. Some ten years later, the budding church was constituted as the Iraqw Lutheran Church, eventually to be incorporated as a synod, and later a diocese, within the nation-wide Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania. Throughout the years, Mbulu diocese has continued to receive financial and human resources support from Norway.

While the church ideally reached out to ethnic groups representing four language families, this research project will

identify both social and cultural reasons as to why one ethnic group emerged as dominant. In historical accounts written by the missionaries themselves, they view the emerging church from an entirely different angle; as "the work of God".²² This understanding rests firmly on the premise of Christian mission being *missio Dei*; "sent to the world", and the missionaries seeing themselves as God's envoys. The historical, socio-cultural context of Tanganyika, later Tanzania, generally appears only as bleak descriptions in the background, as a parallel story largely divorced from the evolvement of the church. Only rarely does the outside world emerge as an active agent in the mission's story; a case in point being when the British colonial government decided that the only place where the mission could build a hospital would be in the Haydom area.

This normative model typically structures a unilineal narrative in which the mission is situated as the primary agent, and the generalized local population as recipients to activities and institutional efforts such as church services, schools and health clinics. While people live in a real world where issues such as ethnicity influence outcomes, a theologized model only sees people in a generalized sense, or "souls", and consequently tend to overlook factors that might throw revealing light on developments.

In the normative model, successful developments are interpreted as "God opening doors", while negative outcomes are simply left uncommented or even theologized as Satanic, evil doings. Such shaping of history is problematic from a political and epistemological point of view because it easily leads to a hegemonization of interpretation, privileging one's normative account and muting others. Even if hegemonization is not deliberate (rather being an uncritical result of

the normative model of history writing), it needs to be scrutinized in terms of what Bhaskar calls "epistemic fallacy".²³ The normative model becomes "reductionistic" in its own way, leaving out data that may actually have significance not only for increasing our general knowledge of history in Mbulu, but also for exploring the inter-dynamics between faith and culture. The missionaries were content with seeing people being converted, and seemed to be oblivious to how their own positioning within the dynamic forces of the larger society contributed to the fact that it was mostly Iraqw and "Iraqwized" others that turned to the church.

Can theological and non-theological readings of events find common ground? Some years ago, a group of academic historians and theologians met in East Africa with the purpose of reviewing the history of Western mission-initiated churches, only to discover the insurmountability of their respective premises regarding how to understand evolvment in time and history.²⁴ The Christian theologians saw history as the unfolding of God's plan for the world to the end of Time, while the academic historians saw history simply as the critical unfolding of human events through time and with no metaphysical implications. Lamin Sanneh proposed a combined view in which God's mission is being realized through the empirical reality of human efforts - including all the weaknesses and apparent failures - in historical time.²⁵ This proposal is, however, still a theological one, based on the notion of divine existence and agency, and is thus limited to whether one accepts that premise.

The Cultural Realist Option

In 1999, Paul G. Hiebert introduced the application a philosophical premise called

'critical realism' as a way of anchoring the study of Christian mission in a dimension beyond theological specifics.²⁶ Critical realism, a philosophy of knowledge developed by Roy Bhaskar,²⁷ integrates ontology and epistemology by claiming that reality (ontology) is real in itself irrespective of human knowledge (epistemology) of it.²⁸ In principle, this position asserts the possibility of God's existence and agency. Empirical conditions in this world shape and limit the actual bodies of knowledge held by people, but being part of reality, human beings are capable of obtaining ontologically valid knowledge including being subject to divine revelation. Hiebert employs this model to account for how the diversity of historically conditioned theologies and ecclesiastical bodies of doctrines and practices can yet be embedded in the ontological reality of divine revelation.

I have used critical realism in an anthropological study of Christian conversion viewed as an inescapable interaction between culture and new faith.²⁹ The study (conducted in Bolivia) could well have limited itself to the classical cultural relativistic method, but I chose to take a step further by positively affirming the possibility of divine existence and revelation to mankind. The intention of such a step was to contribute towards opening up for new engagements between academic anthropology and theology. Now, critical findings in the field cannot simply be dismissed as a kind of mischief from "godless" anthropology, which was a common reaction among evangelical Christians. The Bolivian church in question belongs to a conservative tradition in which conversion is projected as a radical, discontinuous break with the "worldly" past. Such dualistic theologizing does not leave room for any evidence of cultural condi-

tioning other than to denounce it as conversion "gone bad". It is considered to be syncretism that, given the correct input, can be corrected and purified of pre-conversion thinking. My Bolivian material reveals, however, that far from all pre-conversion religious-cultural elements disappear. Rather, they become "white-washed" by being articulated through new "evangelical" symbols, and are thus reintegrated and re-conceptualized into the converted state in ways that fit the discourse of radical conversion. Given that the research project in principle acknowledges the reality of divine action through conversion, dualistic theology is challenged to consider that cultural continuities are not necessarily anomalies but rather inevitable parts of contextualized faith.

The project in Mbulu will continue to explore how both anthropology and theology can benefit when a religious topic, or rather; a religion-in-society topic, is premised on critical realism. Fundamentally, it clears away that continuously contested question of whether it is divinely or humanly grounded, which so easily turns off the reader if he/she does not agree with the basic premise. A religious reader will hardly trust whatever a pronounced atheist such as Firth writes, and, likewise, we have numerous examples of how secularists frown upon Christian-based anthropology. The advantage of critical realism is to firmly state that questions about ultimate existential truths and explanations need not be deliberated on in an anthropological project, leaving both researcher and reader to concentrate on the commitment to take the research object seriously on its own terms, and being willing to seriously consider the implications of the empirical findings.

One Actor Among Many: The Multi-Protagonist Model

In researching mission work, critical realism thus allows one to experiment with methodologies other than the normatively conditioned unilinear model. With no need to defend nor privilege the mission as the one active agent, a fuller picture of church-in-society can be obtained by situating the mission as one actor among many. History does not "start" with the coming of the mission, nor does history merely serve as descriptive backdrop to the enfolding mission story, nor as a parallel narrative. Rather, the mission enters and is integrated into, an ongoing historical process, which is continuously being shaped by the combined interactions of agencies such as the colonial government, various indigenous groups and their leaders, and also by individual social entrepreneurs. To anthropology, any and all social or cultural phenomena are *contingent*. Nothing in society exists or evolves in isolation. The other actors in Mbulu do not react to the mission and its message as a singular insertion into their locality, but also, or perhaps mostly, in terms of what that insertion means in relation to other variables as well. Likewise, further actions taken by the mission are also shaped by the actions of others.

This compound perspective of mutual contact and interaction taking place within matrixes of possibilities and constraints needs to be brought to the level of subjective agency. In principle, studies on how individuals engage the social world should always consider them as actors. The concept of social actor comes from rational choice theory, which often portrays actors as strategists and innovators who break cultural rules in order to maximize themselves or the interests that they represent.³⁰ Conventional behavior and

seeming inaction may, however, also be strategic. Staying away from the church, for instance, is an active choice. A *multi-protagonist perspective* will better fathom and account for the total scenario of social actors, all of whom take the "leading role" in their own lives when they form part of and engage the unfolding social scene in Mbulu.

Moreover, by breaking up the unilinear model, the multi-protagonist perspective democratizes history. Hitherto unknown or little studied events and situations propelled by other actors, which have not yet made it into the missionary-controlled narratives whether by design or ignorance, need to come to light. Apart from venturing into the anthropological and theological concerns mentioned above, this research project, then, also hopes to contribute towards the general expansion of our knowledge of Mbulu.

Concluding Remarks

This article has focused on how anthropology can rediscover the study of Christianity and Christian mission as worthy anthropological subjects. Not only does this provide the discipline with opportunities to enrich its knowledge of phenomena that were previously stigmatized or entirely overlooked, but it can likewise bring the mission and church environments in contact with socio-cultural findings that may widen and deepen the understandings of questions such as the inter-dynamics between faith and culture.

While an anthropology based on a specific Christian premise may equally be able to provide valuable insights into empirical questions, I wish to contribute towards an anthropology that is trustworthy in the eyes of believers while also being able to maintain a critical distance to its object of study.³¹ The critical realist posi-

tion allows the researcher to positively accept the believers' premise of God's existence and intervention in the world without needing to fear that the anthropological endeavor is being compromised in any way. This lies at the heart of the ongoing research project of the development of the Lutheran church in the multi-ethnic setting in Mbulu, Tanzania, from its early beginning as a Scandinavian mission to today's challenge of readjusting its practices to the ethnic situation in the area.

By acknowledging the reality of divine agency, anthropology is in a position to credibly engage religious matters, theological disciplines, and believers in new ways. Data concerning the inter-dynamics between culture and faith such as; cultural continuity in conversion, how and why the Christian faith evolves differently in different ethnic and cultural contexts, can now be detached from an essentialized theological reading of developments and instead be integrated into a larger understanding of church-in-society. This epistemic clarification brings to conservative theology a reconsideration of how the socio-cultural dimension of human life works in integration with, and not against, the acquisition and evolvement of Christian faith.

This does not dissolve the theological tension that will always exist between biblical norms and sociocultural notions, but it should nonetheless challenge Christians to reflect on how normative discourses too easily fall under the spell of epistemic fallacy. Christians are converts, yes, but, also sociocultural beings. Anthropological awareness about how humans, even if they are converts, continuously depend on sociocultural habituation in their lives, opens up for acknowledging the instrumentality of society and culture – which in turn can feed back into a matured theology of culture.

Notes

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2. See Fiona Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000); Morton Klass, *Ordered Universes. Approaches to the Anthropology of Religion*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995),
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26. Paul G. Hiebert Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts*. (Harrisburg: Trinity House, 1999).
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28. See also McGrath, *A Scientific Theology. Reality*, 195-244.
29. Jøssang, *Searching for a More Powerful Christ*.
30. Fredrik Barth favours the term "social entrepreneur" regarding actors who get things moving by unorthodox breaking of conventions. See Barth, *Process and Form in Social Life. Selected Essays of Fredrik Barth. Vol. 1*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1991).
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