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Shifting Positions between Anthropology, Religion and Development: The Case of Christianity

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Abstract

Anthropologists in Africa used to have an ambivalent relationship with missionary Christianity and international development work. Being active in the same areas but with different intentions reinforced mutual stereotypes and added to the uneasiness. This seems to be changing now. Christianity has passed its missionary stage and is now an African religion, interesting to study for anthropologists and 'applied anthropology' allows anthropologists to make their discipline more meaningful and relevant to today's world. The involvement of medical anthropologists in health development is a case in point.

Keywords

Anthropologists, Christianity, religion, missionaries, development, applied anthropology, exoticism, Africa

Anthropologists and Missionaries

Some years ago I was invited to write a background paper for a conference on missionaries and anthropologists. I was attracted by the topic because of an intriguing paradox. On the one hand, anthropologists tend to regard missionaries as their antipodes. Missionaries personify what anthropologists find most distasteful — ethnocentrism; missionaries proclaim their own way of thinking and living as superior, if not the only 'true' one. They are talkers (preachers) and agents of change (converters), whereas anthropologists like to see themselves as listeners and custodians of culture. In their view, missionaries destroy local values and institutions, rituals and objects of art while they (anthropologists), preserve and record them. The former's interference is contrasted with the latter's non-intervention. Mission leads to alienation, anthropology to

recognition. Bernard Delfendahl summarized these stereotypical contrasts as follows:

A missionary, *as such*, invites himself to teach mankind, convinced that he is endowed with what others lack and that it is his mission to convert them to it... The anthropologist, *as such*, goes to learn *from* mankind. The two attitudes are *essentially* opposed, even though in individuals, they may be mingled.¹

Yet, on the other hand, missionaries and anthropologists have so much in common that one may as well call them congeners, partners in the common enterprise of getting involved in another culture. The congeniality is twofold. First, anthropologists and missionaries are both moved by ideological considerations, however loudly the former may deny this and claim cultural (and religious) relativism. Put differently, anthropologists as well as missionaries interpret the world in which they have come to live through concepts that are meaningful and credible to *their* 'metaphysics'. Each interpretation is necessarily a re-interpretation that accommodates the observations and other 'data' within their own belief, be that religious or 'scientific', evolutionist or poetic. The second congeniality lies in the missionary becoming an anthropologist. Let me first dwell on this second point of similarity.²

Missionary Ethnography

The Ghanaian anthropologist Maxwell Owusu³ has remarked that a good command of the local language is indispensable in anthropological fieldwork, for methodological as well as practical and humanitarian purposes. Very few anthropologists will disagree with him. How many anthropologists failed to master this 'indispensable' ingredient for good fieldwork is unknown, however. The frequent use of local terms in ethnographic studies gives the impression that the authors were conversant in the local language. But were they? Owusu claimed that even such renowned anthropologists as E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Meier Fortes had a poor command of the local language.

¹ Bernard Delfendahl, 'On anthropologists vs missionaries', *Current Anthropology* 22/1 (1981), 89.

² The next paragraphs draw upon Sjaak van der Geest, 'Anthropologists and Missionaries: Brothers under the Skin', *Man* 25/4 (1990), 588-601.

³ Maxwell Owusu, 'Ethnography of Africa: The Usefulness of the Useless', *American Anthropologist* 80 (1978), 310-34.

Missionaries compare favourably on this point. While fieldwork is a 'rite de passage' for anthropologists,⁴ for many missionaries their stay abroad was more or less their destination. A stay of ten years or more in the same area was normal. Language study was therefore a logical investment. Many missionaries began their work with language training, which took six months or longer. It thus seems likely that a good command of the language was far more common among missionaries than among anthropologists.

The longer period that missionaries spent abroad also had other consequences, which may have made them better ethnographers than anthropologists. Because of their longer stay, missionaries became more insiders; not only were they seen as such by local communities who became fully accustomed to their presence, they also felt that way. Their interests lay in the community. The fact that their destiny partly overlapped with that of the local population was bound to have a deep influence on their position in the field. One could call the missionary an immigrant who built up a new existence abroad and who had to establish lasting — though not necessarily good — relationships with the people around him.

Most anthropologists, by contrast, resemble visitors. The shortness of their stay influences the character of their experiences and their relationships.⁵ The term 'participatory observation' is pretentious and sometimes outright misleading. What the anthropologist feels and sees while participating is of an entirely different order than that which the local inhabitants see and feel. That difference is explained by the fact that the anthropologist, unlike the inhabitants, is not 'imprisoned' in the place and can leave whenever he wants.

Missionaries took a somewhat intermediate position; they were far more tied to the area and the culture, although they too could of course leave the place if the situation became too difficult for them. Overall, one could say that being a missionary had methodological and epistemological advantages which most anthropologists lacked.

I admit, this picture of the missionary as an anthropologist may be too rosy. I am not saying that all missionaries spoke the local language fluently, nor that they all identified themselves with those around them, but I do believe that the fact that they held out so long made their perspective on the society more

⁴ M. Freilich, 'Fieldwork: An Introduction', in: M. Freilich (ed.), *Marginal Natives: Anthropologists at Work*, New York: Harper & Co 1970, 1-37.

⁵ Some anthropologists, however, maintain a long lasting relationship with 'their' people and continue *visiting* (mind the term) them. In my own case, up to today I have kept visiting the community of Kwahu Tafo in Ghana where I started my language study and fieldwork in 1969.

'realistic'. The missionary's experiences reflected more of a common destiny and solidarity with the 'locals' than those of the anthropologist. Paul Hiebert compared the position of anthropologists and missionaries as follows:

Despite their [the anthropologists'] intimate association with people during their fieldwork, they remained ultimately segregated from them. Anthropologists returned to the safety of their academic environments where they could talk about 'their people'. In the long run they shared even less identification with the 'natives' than the missionaries.⁶

The epistemological lead of the missionary over the anthropologist applies particularly in the study of religion. Most anthropologists who study religion run into difficulties, as they are unable to take the religious part of the religion seriously. Anthropologists have written thousands of pages about witchcraft, but few of these were written by a 'believer'. Some anthropologists 'play' with the idea that they may believe in such a thing as witchcraft, but if you ask them directly whether or not they believe, they prevaricate. Evans-Pritchard, for example, who did not believe in Zande witchcraft, wrote:

In no department of their life was I more successful in 'thinking black', or as it should more correctly be said 'feeling black', than in the sphere of witchcraft. I, too, used to react to misfortunes in the idiom of witchcraft...⁷

Elsewhere, however, he plainly said: 'Witches, as the Azande conceive them, cannot exist.'⁸ But, he continued, a belief in witchcraft provided them with a philosophy, which explains the relation between people and misfortune, and with suggestions for ready-made practical action in the case of misfortune.

I expect that missionaries had less difficulty in sharing the informants' perspective, although witchcraft may not be such a good example here. The missionaries' greater openness to transcendental experiences made them more

⁶ Paul Hiebert, 'Missions and Anthropology: A Love-Hate Relationship', *Missiology* 6 (1978), 165-180.

⁷ E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1937. Evans-Pritchard is somewhat exceptional. Like most of his colleagues, he was sceptical about religion during his stay among the Zande, but around 1940 he became a devout Christian. In a reflection on his fieldwork in Africa he wrote: 'I learnt more about the nature of God and our human predicament from the Nuer than I ever learnt at home.' See: E.E. Evans-Pritchard, 'Some Reminiscences and Reflections on Fieldwork', in his *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (abridged version), Oxford: Clarendon 1976, 240-254.

⁸ Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, 1937, 63.

receptive to local religious opinions than anthropologists. Even if they were opposed to specific religious ideas or practices, as many missionaries indeed were, that attitude showed more empathy for the religious experience than the glib reaction of anthropologists who find it 'very interesting' but are not touched by it. Evans-Pritchard, by the time he became a practising Catholic, was very conscious of this. Using a quotation from Wilhelm Schmidt, he compared the unbeliever writing about religion to a blind person talking about colours.⁹

But there is more: the anthropological interest in other cultures was inherent to the missionary endeavour as well. British anthropology originated in missionary and humanitarian movements in the first half of the nineteenth century, e.g. the Society for the Abolition of Slavery, the Aborigines Protection Society and Wesley's Christian revival movement.¹⁰ The founding in 1926 of the Institute that published the journal *Africa*, was an initiative of scholars, most of whom were closely associated with colonial policy or missionary work, and it was meant to help solve practical problems encountered in a changing Africa. Edwin W. Smith, who was both a missionary and an anthropologist, wrote in an editorial note:

The Institute has from the beginning laid stress on the co-operation of missionaries. The outstanding aim of the Institute is to study African languages and cultures and their educational values, and nobody can be more interested in such studies than missionaries working in Africa. The plan of founding the Institute was first conceived in a missionary circle, and missions are contributing to its financial support.¹¹

The first question asked by the early missionaries, according to Kenneth Burridge,¹² was whether these alien peoples did indeed belong to the human race. The positive reply to that question had enormous consequences. Foreign cultures were drawn into the sphere of interest of Christian European society; they roused their curiosity and sparked off action. The zeal of missionaries to convert, however ethnocentric, was unmistakably a sign of their deep interest in these 'others': they wanted them to join their churches.

⁹ E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1965.

¹⁰ Hiebert, 166.

¹¹ Edwin W. Smith, 'The Story of the Institute: A Survey of Seven Years', *Africa* 7/1 (1934), 1-27.

¹² Kenneth Burridge, *In the Way: A Study of Christian Missionary Endeavours*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 1991.

Moreover, there was missiology, the academic study of mission theory and practice that emerged simultaneously with anthropology. Both disciplines served the European expansion in the world. Within missiology there was a subdiscipline 'missiological anthropology', a form of applied anthropology which was active in the field of health and healing, e.g. studying spiritual healing, healing ministry and healing churches.¹³ But here too, anthropologists remained sceptical: the anthropology practiced in the context of missiology did not get the full recognition of mainstream anthropology. The reason has already been referred to: mission-related anthropologists were believed to be more intent on converting than on understanding.¹⁴

Anthropological Missionising

If anthropologists take ethnocentrism and the imposition of alien criteria as characteristics of the missionary, they also define themselves as missionaries. Anthropologists have designed all kinds of terms to present their activities as the opposite of ethnocentrism: 'grasping the native's point of view', 'to realise *his* vision of *his* world' (Malinowski), 'the emic point of view', 'the idiom of the soul' (Smith), and 'thick description' (Geertz). Nevertheless, anthropological *practice* is different. Practising anthropology means translating and reinterpreting. The anthropology of religion provides a clear example. What 'the others' believe is not understood and described from within, as the 'natives' experience it, but on the basis of the anthropologist's theoretical presuppositions.

One could say that in most cases the anthropologist deprives religion of its original meaning and redefines it into something which is relevant and interesting in the anthropological discourse. Religion thus becomes 'ritual', 'social control', 'a survival strategy', 'an aetiology', 'a philosophy'. It becomes a moral, an ecological, a political, a semantic or a cultural system. In other words, it becomes something which makes sense to the anthropologist. Evans-Pritchard¹⁵ has remarked that for most anthropologists religion is merely 'superstition to be explained... not something an anthropologist, or indeed any rational person, could himself believe in.' Stipe also writes that for most

¹³ J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1989.

¹⁴ For a discussion about missiology (or 'mission studies') and development, see the contribution to this issue by Frans Wijzen.

¹⁵ E.E. Evans-Pritchard, 'Religion and the Anthropologists', in his *Essays in Social Anthropology*, London: Faber & Faber 1962, 29-45 (in particular p. 36).

anthropologists 'religious beliefs are essentially meaningless'¹⁶ and he cites Radcliffe-Brown's advice: 'it is on the rites rather than the beliefs that we should first concentrate our attention.' Hiebert, a missionary and anthropologist, criticizes the anthropologists for not taking religion seriously:

Scientific methodology, as it came to be used in anthropology, dehumanized people. ... Given a growing atheistic and deterministic stance, it is not surprising that early anthropologists gave little respect to the people's explanations of their own activities. They treated religions as irrational superstitions, and gave scientific explanations for human beliefs and activities in terms of economic and environmental factors on the one hand, or of sociopolitical factors on the other. Anthropologists were no less philosophically ethnocentric in their relationship to other world views than were most Christian missionaries.¹⁷

Anthropologists called the ideas of the people they studied 'magic', 'religion' or 'local knowledge', but their own ideas were considered social science or true understanding. The difference between the missionary proclaiming his superior knowledge in the name of Jesus and the anthropologist doing the same thing in the name of Metaphor shrinks.

In some comments on Stipe's 1980 article, the anthropologist's ethnocentrism has indeed been compared to that of the missionary. Nuááez¹⁸ speaks of 'competing ideologies', while Salamone writes that anthropologists can be as 'fundamentalist' as missionaries, fundamentalism being 'that attitude of mind which characterizes persons who believe they possess complete truth', whether they are Christian missionaries or agnostic anthropologists.¹⁹ Guiart remarked:

... the failings of the missionaries parallel and complement those of anthropologists, each bringing with them, as their greatest hindrance, a complete set of symbols and ideas which they strive to impose upon people.²⁰

He added that 'missionaries are easier to see through' than anthropologists because the latter claim to be without presuppositions.

The refusal to take religion seriously is rationalized by the anthropologists' simplification of religion. Sticking to their own certainties anthropologists are

¹⁶ C.E. Stipe, 'Anthropologists versus Missionaries: The influence of Presuppositions', *Current Anthropology* 21/2 (1980), 165-179 (in particular pp. 167-168).

¹⁷ Hiebert, 168-169.

¹⁸ R.L. Nuááez, 'Comment', *Current Anthropology* 21/2 (1980), 171.

¹⁹ F. Salamone, 'Comment', *Current Anthropology* 21/2 (1980), 174.

²⁰ J. Guiart, 'Comment', *Current Anthropology* 21/2 (1980), 170-171.

neither able to see the black hole at the end of their explanations nor to recognize that religious hypotheses fall within the range of rationality if one 'thinks further'. Hiebert writes:

The question of ultimate truth arises. Earlier anthropology had wrestled with the concept of cultural relativism. Now it faces philosophical relativism. To take other thought systems seriously is to raise the question of their truthfulness vis-à-vis science. Anthropology is being forced to confront the problem missions faced earlier, namely, what is truth, and how does one thought system that claims to be true relate to other thought systems.²¹

The anthropologists' view of Christian religion as out-dated science is itself out-dated. Religion is not rendered redundant by the progress of the natural sciences; many Christians may prove more 'atheistic' than the 'innocent anthropologist' has thought possible. Mary Douglas' rhetorical question to her colleague anthropologists still applies: 'How naïve can we get about the beliefs of others?'²²

Another point of comparison between missionaries and anthropologists deserves attention. Missionaries have been more successful in coming to terms with their colonial past and have made more progress in the decolonization of their profession. Christian churches now play a leading role in struggles against repressive regimes and in international theological discussions Third World theologians form the avant-garde of their profession. Representatives of 'liberation theology' (originating from Latin America) and 'black theology' are indeed setting trends in modern theology and mission studies. This cannot be said of Third World anthropologists.

My deliberately provocative conclusion was that some missionaries were better anthropologists than anthropologists and that anthropologists were as 'missionary' as missionaries. When I tried to publish my views on the hidden similarities between missionaries and anthropologists, I met considerable resistance from some anthropological peer reviewers who suspected secret missionary intentions. My call upon anthropological colleagues 'to be more suspicious of their own suspicions towards missionaries'²³ appeared to them the work of a 'fifth column' of missionaries trying to take over the publication

²¹ Hiebert, 174.

²² M. Douglas, 'Purity and danger. An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo.' Harmondsworth: Penguin 1970, 73.

²³ P. Pels, 'How did Bishop Arkefeld get his Feathered Mitre?', *Critique of Anthropology* 10/1 (1990), 103-112 (in particular p. 103).

channels of anthropology.²⁴ The old stereotypes of the missionary as incompetent researcher due to his religious commitments and the anthropologist as a 'blank' non-interfering observer proved still alive.

Anthropologists and Development

Anthropologists, who in the distant past have been accused of being hand-maidens of colonialism²⁵ and more recently of imperialist politics,²⁶ have become somewhat wary of 'applied' anthropology.²⁷ It would be naïve, however, to think that anthropological research can ever avoid being 'applied'; not only missionaries but also anthropologists bring about cultural change. If one accepts change as a 'normal' feature of culture, one will agree that preventing change is indeed 'change' in a more complex sense of the term. But there is also a simpler — often unintended — form of change to which missionaries as well as anthropologists contribute. Their mere presence is in itself a formidable factor of change. The culture which missionaries and anthropologists carry with them is 'contagious'. Local communities must cope with their presence and undergo their cultural representations. Whether they like it or not, anthropologists also make conversions, even if it were only through the 'gospel of a clean shirt.'²⁸

The discussion about 'applied' and 'non-applied' anthropology is particularly clear in medical anthropology and its relation to medicine. The culture of medicine is practical, problem-oriented. Doctors are supposed to find concrete solutions to concrete problems. A second, closely connected, element of

²⁴ The article was eventually published in *Man* (Van der Geest 1990). For an anthropological reaction to the article, see: R.N. Rapoport, 'Missionaries and Anthropologists (Comments)', *Man* 26/4 (1991), 740-743; and my response: S. van der Geest, 'Missionaries and Anthropologists (Comments)', *Man* 26/4 (1991), 743-744.

²⁵ To quote an example from Dutch colonial politics in the East Indies: in 1870, the anthropologist Snouck Hurgronje, helped to end a thirty-year war in the Aceh province.

²⁶ Anthropologists have been involved in counter-insurgency activities for the USA in Latin America and are now active in Afghanistan.

²⁷ This is not to say that applied anthropology was totally neglected. There has always been a minority in anthropology that was deeply involved in the humanisation of development: A. Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1995; J.C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven *et al.*: Yale University Press 1998; J. Nederveen Pieterse, *Development Theory: Deconstructions / Reconstructions*. London: Sage 2001; J. Van Willigen, *Applied Anthropology: An Introduction*, Westport CT: Bergin & Garvey 2002.

²⁸ M. Herskovits, *The Human Factor in Changing Africa*, New York: A.A. Knopf 1962.

medical culture is that there is no time to lose. Interventions have to be carried out promptly, before it is 'too late'. Thirdly, medical doctors measure their success by people's health. The maintenance and restoration of physical well-being is the *raison d'être* of their profession. They are, to use Glasser's term, accountable to people. If their intervention does not yield effects in terms of better health, they have failed and deserve criticism.²⁹

The chief ingredients of anthropology are almost directly juxtaposed to those of medicine. Present-day mainstream anthropology has a dominantly theoretical, somewhat philosophical character. The type of anthropology which carries the most prestige is descriptive, interpretive and reflexive. *Applied* anthropology is regarded by many as a dilution of true anthropology, an almost scornful concession to non-anthropologists, the 'others'. Moreover, if it is done for money — and it usually is — it reeks of professional prostitution. One could almost say that an anthropologist who wants to be respected by his colleagues should not worry himself about the practical application of his research. This constitutes a radical change from the trend of forty years ago when it was *bon ton* to question 'pure' anthropology and to urge anthropologists to place themselves at the service of the unprivileged.

Consequently, the average anthropologist is in no hurry to finish his research and write up his data. The disdain for practical matters reappears in the slow production of publications. Anthropologists claim that their insight and interpretations need time to 'ripen'. In a reflection on her research about witchcraft beliefs in rural France, Favret-Saada wrote that it took her 'some time' before she was able to understand the deeper implications of her field notes.³⁰ There is nothing unusual in an anthropologist writing about fieldwork conducted more than twenty years earlier. I have been doing it myself.

For an anthropologist the fulfilment of his task does not lie in an improvement of the lives of the people studied, but in the production of texts about them. An anthropologist who does not publish must indeed perish. If a medical doctor finds satisfaction in the recovery of a patient, the anthropologist derives happiness from a publication which is well received by his colleagues. His accountability is first and foremost to his colleagues who literally 'count' his publications, even the number of times they have been cited by others. His

²⁹ M. Glasser, 'Accountability of Anthropologists, Indigenous Healers, and their Governments: A Plea for Reasonable Medicine', *Social Science & Medicine* 27/12 (1988), 1461-1464 (in particular p. 1461).

³⁰ J. Favret-Saada, 'About Participation', *Culture, Medicine & Psychiatry* 14/2 (1990), 189-199.

accountability to the people among whom he carried out the research is minimal, although this is gradually changing.

It is no wonder that these two cultures which, in many respects, are opposed to one another, have an uneasy relationship. For many, on both sides of the dividing line, 'medical anthropology' is an oxymoron. 'Orthodox' anthropologists, for this matter, may view their applied anthropology colleagues as near 'apostates' and 'doers' in (health) development may regard them as 'useless'.

Streefland sums up a few grievances which health practitioners have against anthropologists.³¹ Anthropologists, they say, seem hardly concerned about the well-being of people and do not attempt to help them to solve their problems. What they find particularly annoying is that anthropologists refuse to offer positive suggestions for the improvement of people's life conditions, but are quick to criticize and ridicule the attempts of medical doctors and health planners. They also complain that anthropologists take too long doing their research and publishing the results. And, finally, they do not understand nor appreciate, the theoretical bent in the work of anthropologists. Many medical scientists and practitioners find the long and wordy treatises by anthropologists esoteric 'babble', not real science. Anthropologists, on the other hand, look down upon the reductionist biologicistic views of medical scientists. Anthropologists have a long tradition of allergy (we do like medical metaphors) to natural science, and to biological explanations in particular. Indeed, the origin and growth of cultural anthropology can succinctly be described as a persistent reaction to the waves of scientism, in the history of western civilization. This was particularly true for anthropology in the United States with people like Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Melville Herskovits, Edward Sapir and — more recently — Clifford Geertz. The optimism of natural scientists who claim that they can predict human behaviour and change (improve) the world shows their naiveté. Among anthropologists pessimism and skepticism are more fashionable.

Shifting Positions

It may be too early to draw clear conclusions about recent developments in anthropology, but it seems to me that anthropologists are shifting their position toward Christianity and development.

³¹ P. Streefland, 'Antropologen op betwist terrein: Volksgezondheid en gezondheidszorg in ontwikkelingslanden', *Medische Antropologie* 3/1 (1991), 97-107.

Christianity in Africa, for example, is no longer a missionary enterprise nor an imposed Western ideology and way of life. The tables are being turned: Christian churches in many African countries have now reached an autochthonous identity and status while they are growing more and more 'exotic' in the old world of Western Europe, once the main supplier of missionaries. As a result, Christian beliefs, practices and functionaries are no longer taken for granted; they now raise curiosity among anthropologists of religion, both at home and abroad. One can therefore say that the anthropological interest in 'vernacular' or 'native' Christianity grew with the waning of Christianity in the society from where most anthropologists hailed.

Two British anthropologists, Terence Ranger and Godfrey Lienhardt, were among the trendsetters who opened up anthropology of religion to include the study of Christian beliefs while it was first largely restricted to 'traditional' or 'other' religions. A special issue of the *American Ethnologist*³² and a collection of essays presented to Lienhardt³³ heralded this new direction in religious anthropology. By now, anthropologists are doing fieldwork among Christian believers, especially among those that are distinctly different from missionary Christianity (for example Pentecostal churches) but also among the more 'orthodox' churches. One can, therefore, safely say that Christianity, both abroad and at home, has become a flourishing study field in anthropology.

Simultaneously, anthropologists have also re-discovered development as a legitimate object and objective of study. Applied is less viewed as 'diluted' and divested of theory. Drawing practical conclusions from ethnographic fieldwork and making recommendations for policy or practice requires theoretical insight. The irony of many policy recommendations by anthropologists is that they are based on simplistic theorising. They do not take into account the complex political and social ramifications where their recommendations are being received. Moreover, their failure to come up with practical suggestions reveals their lack of reflection on their own position in the web of conflicting interests and competing parties that constitute their 'field'; they cannot shrug off the practical implications of their presence in that field. Conversely, concern about the practical implications of their research shows reflexivity and theoretical maturity.³⁴

³² J. Schneider (ed.), 'Frontiers of Christian Evangelism', Special issue of *American Ethnologist* 14/1 (1987).

³³ W. James and D.H. Johnson (eds.), *Vernacular Christianity: Essays in the Social Anthropology of Religion*, Oxford: JASO 1988.

³⁴ Cf. S. van der Geest, 'Thick and Thinned Description: How Useful Can Medical Anthro-

A telling illustration of anthropological involvement in the development debate is a collection of essays that deals with the cultural and global complexity of addressing environmental problems.³⁵ Starting with Hardin's well-known parable about 'the tragedy of the commons', Van Santen argues for 'mutually agreed upon coercion' as a way out of the unfair and unequal plundering of the world's environment. Another, typical anthropological point is her plea for a relocation of the dominant voices in the development discourse from 'Western' to 'sub-altern' participants.

The rapid growth of medical anthropology as sub-discipline illustrates the present move towards applied anthropology. Next to their highly theoretical work (on embodiment, suffering; sensory experience, emotion, biopolitics, biosociality), medical anthropologists get more and more involved in health development programmes. Researchers are active both in anthropology *of* medicine and anthropology *in* medicine. Organizations such as WHO, USAID, Médecins sans Frontières, HealthNet, Oxfam, Terre des Hommes and smaller NGOs employ anthropologists to make their work more sensitive to the needs of their clients. Qualitative approaches such as participant observation, conversation (in stead of 'interviews'), and focus group discussions are now commonly practised to complement and interpret their statistics.

There are at least two — somewhat contrasting — plausible explanations for this rapprochement. In the first place, many new generation anthropologists choose medical anthropology as their specialisation in order to be 'useful' and to be accountable to those they study. Next to this moral point of view is a more pragmatic one: scarcity of anthropological employment. There is a high production of anthropologists who compete for jobs. As a consequence, anthropologists cannot anymore afford to say no to jobs that the previous generation despised.

Having sketched the growing interest among anthropologists in Christian religion and in the applicability of research data, let me now bring these two trends together. Anthropologists are well aware of the effect of religion, including Christian beliefs, on people's ability to come to terms with the problems

pology Be?', in: R. Park and S. van der Geest (eds.), *Doing and Living Medical Anthropology: Personal Reflections*, Diemen: AMB 2010, 91-106.

³⁵ J. van Santen (ed.), *Development in Place: Perspectives and Challenges*, Amsterdam: Aksant 2008.

they face and to change their life condition.³⁶ The focus on religion as an inherent part of development can, again, be illustrated in the field of health and illness, in particular the case of HIV/AIDS.³⁷

Missionary churches in Africa have always played a prominent role in 'development', for example in education, health care and agriculture, but that contribution was largely overlooked or consciously ignored in anthropological research. Missionary presence was often blotted out from African ethnographies.³⁸ That auto-phobic reaction occurs less in present anthropological work.

Edward Green, in a report for USAID, emphasised the crucial contribution of faith-based organisations to the prevention of HIV/AIDS.³⁹ That contribution includes counselling and support for people with HIV/AIDS, peer educator programmes, medical care for sick people, educational activities to inform the public on the disease, and mitigation of stigma attached to HIV/AIDS. Green supports his view with case studies of Uganda, Senegal, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic. Christian churches, he concludes, are 'strong players' in the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS because of their moral authority and efficient organisation. A report commissioned by a Christian organisation arrives at similar conclusions: faith-based organisations play a substantial role in the prevention of HIV/AIDS thanks to their central position in society and

³⁶ F. Afshar, Exploring the Frontiers in International Development: Countries of the North, Well-Being, Spirituality, and Contemplation, *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 26/3 (2005), 527-546; F. Thomas, Indigenous Narratives of HIV/AIDS: Morality and Blame in a Time of Change, *Medical Anthropology* 27/3 (2008), 227-256.

³⁷ F. Becker and P.W. Geissler (eds.), *Searching for Pathways in a Landscape of Death: Religion and aids in East Africa*, Special issue *Journal of Religion in Africa* 37/1 (2007); F. Becker and P.W. Geissler, 'Introduction. Searching for Pathways in a Landscape of Death: Religion and AIDS in East Africa', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 37/1 (2007), 1-15; H. Behrend, 'The Rise of Occult Powers, AIDS and the Roman Catholic Church in Western Uganda', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 37/1 (2007), 41-58; H. Dilger, 'Healing the Wounds of Modernity: Salvation, Community and Care in a Neo-Pentecostal Church in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 37 (2007), 59-83; J. Sadgrove, "'Keeping up Appearances": Sex and Religion amongst University Students in Uganda', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 37/1 (2007), 116-144; S. Maman *et al.*, 'The Role of Religion in hiv-positive Women's Disclosure Experiences and Coping Strategies in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo', *Social Science & Medicine* 68 (2009), 965-970; R. Prince, P. Denise and R. van Dijk (eds.), *Engaging Christianities: Negotiating HIV/AIDS, Health and Social Relations in East and Southern Africa*, Special issue *Africa Today* 56/1 (2009).

³⁸ S. van der Geest and J.P. Kirby, 'The Absence of the Missionary in African Ethnography, 1940-1965', *African Studies Review* 35/3 (1992), 59-103.

³⁹ Edward C. Green, *Faith-Based Organizations: Contributions to HIV Prevention*, Washington: USAID 2003.

their efficient network in local communities. The report closes with nine recommendations on how faith-based organisations could further improve their service to people with HIV/AIDS.⁴⁰

A brief publication reporting on a symposium about religion and HIV/AIDS in 2009 in Lusaka, Zambia, takes a broader view.⁴¹ Religion, and Christianity in particular, is not only portrayed as an institution that carries out activities but also as a meaningful belief that steers people's views, choices and experiences: 'As religious faith shapes people's perceptions of medicine, these processes have also affected how patients negotiate available therapeutic options.'⁴² The writers emphasise that people with HIV/AIDS rarely regard biomedicine and religious healing as competing or mutually exclusive. 'Even with ART [anti-retroviral treatment], religion is important in providing for the psychological, spiritual and social needs of HIV-positive people.'⁴³ At the same time they point at the possibility that churches use their health activities as ideological tools; 'Donors need to decide whether they support the missionary tendencies that might come as a corollary of collaborating with religious organizations.'⁴⁴

A special issue of the *Journal of African Religion*⁴⁵ explores how HIV/AIDS in East Africa is perceived, explained and 'reworked' through religious ideas and practices, and how the disease, in turn, has changed by religious experiences. Significantly, most of the papers⁴⁶ focus on Christian beliefs and practices. According to the editors, the contributions

reveal the creativity and innovations that continuously emerge in the everyday life... between bodily and spiritual experiences, and between religious, medical, political and economic discourses.⁴⁷

A purely medical approach to HIV/AIDS fails to grasp local understandings of responses to the disease, Thomas concludes in her study of indigenous illness

⁴⁰ CMMB (Catholic Medical Mission Board), *Faith in Action: Examining the Role of Faith-Based Organizations in Addressing HIV/AIDS*, Washington: Global Health Council 2005.

⁴¹ M. Burchardt, A. Hardon and J. de Klerk, *Faith Matters: Religion and Biomedical Treatment for hiv/aids in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Diemen: AMB 2009.

⁴² Burchardt *et al.*, ix.

⁴³ Burchardt *et al.*, xi.

⁴⁴ Burchardt *et al.*, xi.

⁴⁵ Becker and Geissler (eds.), *Searching for pathways in a landscape of death: Religion and AIDS in East Africa*.

⁴⁶ Behrend, 41-58; Dilger, 59-83; Sadgrove, 116-144.

⁴⁷ Becker and Geissler, 1.

narratives in Namibia.⁴⁸ The progress that anthropologists have made is that they recognize that local understandings need not be solely beliefs in witchcraft and evil eye, but increasingly include local variations of Christianity that were once introduced by Western missionaries.

Concluding Observations

Anthropologists tend to be ambivalent about 'religion and development'. The first ambivalence concerns missionary religion, Christianity. Over the past three quarters of a century, during which both missionaries and anthropologists were active in sub-Saharan Africa, most anthropologists regarded missionaries as 'brothers under the skin', working in the same communities for opposite reasons (conversion versus understanding). Moreover, the large majority of anthropologists saw themselves as agnostics or non-believers and disliked to be confronted with their own — too familiar — Christian roots in non-Christian Africa. In reaction, until about the 1970s, anthropologists blotted most vestiges of Christian presence from their African ethnographies.

The ambivalence towards 'development' is somewhat related to the previous one: development too was often perceived as a 'missionary' enterprise of conversion. Within mainstream anthropology, applied anthropology tended to be regarded with suspicion, as a 'watered-down' type of practice that had sold its soul to political or commercial organizations. The main purpose of anthropology — increasing knowledge and cultural understanding — was being compromised, they thought, in applied anthropology.

This seems to be changing now. Christianity itself has become an 'exotic' topic for anthropologists; it attracts their attention and raises their curiosity and it does no longer confront them with memories of boring and/or uncomfortable experiences during their youth. Several of my present colleagues are sincerely interested in and fascinated by Christian beliefs and practices.

At the same time, more and more anthropologists want to shed their purely 'academic' reputation and make their discipline more meaningful and relevant to today's world. The involvement of medical anthropologists in health development is a case in point.

⁴⁸ Thomas, 251.

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