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The Anthropology of Christianity

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Within the past decade, a comparative, self-conscious anthropology of Christianity has begun to come into its own. This claim is of course subject to some qualification; it would be incorrect to say that prior to this time there had been no works treating Christianity in descriptive, ethnographic terms, and some have taken it up as a regional challenge (Barker 1990, Glazier 1980) or as a comparative thematic (Saunders 1988). Moreover, institutions central to many Christian traditions, such as conversion (Hefner 1993) and missionization (e.g. Huber 1988, Hvalkof and Aaby 1981, Rafael 1992, Comoraff and Comaroff 1991, 1997) have in the past attracted some anthropological attention. However, only recently has there been a concerted call from anthropologists for their discipline to consider seriously the possibility of routinely putting the religion of Christian populations at the center of ethnographic accounts. This call has been accompanied by an emerging commitment to thinking comparatively and theoretically about similarities and differences in the shapes and histories of Christianity in various Christian populations (Cannell 2006, Engelke and Tomlinson 2006, Keane 2007, Robbins 2003a, 2007a, Scott 2005). While not everyone who is a part of this emerging conversation would necessarily recognize themselves in the descriptor of ‘Anthropologist of Christianity,’ and several important contribution regarding the relationship between Christianity and anthropological knowledge predated the subfield’s establishment, it is fair to say that the anthropology of Christianity is finally receiving a degree of anthropological attention that has previously escaped it.

To say that the anthropology of Christianity has only emerged in the last decade is also to say that until that time anthropologists had, despite the few kinds of exceptions

noted above, largely neglected the study of this world religion. The reasons for the original anthropological rejection of Christianity as an object of research are numerous, and many of them are related to fundamental disciplinary tendencies. Most obvious in this regard is the way the seemingly ‘ready-at-hand,’ familiar nature of the religion for most American and European anthropologists has led to a sense among them that Christianity lacks the degree of cultural alterity that has until quite recently been definitional of an apt disciplinary object. In more complex terms, one can argue that it is not so much Christian familiarity that accounts for this history of avoidance, as it is that for secular anthropologists Christians appear confusingly to be at once too similar and too different to be easily amenable to study (Robbins 2003a). Taking their similarity as a given, among the ways Christians are too different has to be counted the conservatism or political quietism of so many of the Christian communities anthropologists encounter in the Global South. Anthropologists often find such Christians to be “disappointing subalterns” (Maxwell 2006, p. 10), who vote for the wrong parties and seem more concerned with private devotion than public engagement. By virtue of their political views (and in some cases what anthropologists take to be their anti-modernism), anthropologists have often defined them as, to use Harding’s terms from an important article that anticipated the new wave of interest in Christianity, culturally repugnant others whom it is best to avoid (Harding 1991). A final deep seated disciplinary reason for the anthropological resistance to studying Christianity, particularly among populations of recent converts, may be found in the tendency within cultural anthropology to foreground long-standing cultural continuities over recent cultural changes, thus rendering anthropologists suspicious of the claims converts make to have radically transformed

their lives and societies. From this vantage point, the Christianity of converts is often treated as epiphenomenal, merely a thin veneer laid over an enduring prior culture and as such not worthy of research (Robbins 2007a, cf. Barker 1992).

Given these disciplinary barriers to the study of Christianity, the question arises as to what has changed in recent years to allow anthropologists to overcome them. Perhaps the most important change has been the extent to which fieldworkers have come to confront devout Christian populations in the field. The past century – and particularly the last fifty years – has seen a tremendous expansion of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Oceania (see Barker 1990, Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose 1996, Jenkins 2002, Walls 1996), and a parallel explosion of Protestantism in Latin America (Martin 1990). Much of this growth has been of Pentecostal and charismatic groups whose members practice their faith in ways that make their commitments hard to ignore, and whose frank supernaturalism aligns them more closely to the kinds of religions anthropologists more often study (Douglas 2001). Furthermore, the return of various forms of Christianity into the public sphere during the last quarter of the twentieth century (Casanova 1994), both in the West and elsewhere, has had an effect on the anthropological imagination that should not be underestimated. The combined force of political prominence, demographic growth, and visible piety has made Christianity unavoidable in many ethnographic settings, as well as newly important at home, and has therefore made the development of the anthropology of Christianity not only possible, but also something many anthropologists have come to see as necessary.

We devote the remainder of this review to a survey of some key concerns of this emerging sub-discipline. Although too new to have produced much in the way of settled

traditions of research, we hope to show that a decade's worth of work has already begun to uncover important trends that will shape this area of study into the future. Specifically, this review will highlight the common claim that in cultures that have recently adopted Christianity, conversion often triggers a partial abandonment of social and cultural forms oriented toward the collective in favor of individualist models of social organization. This transformation from quintessentially traditional models of social embeddedness towards individualism is in turn often interpreted as a step towards modernity or towards globalization. Debates about the accuracy of these claims regarding the individualizing and modernizing force of Christianity have been important in much of the contemporary anthropological literature on Christianity. So too have discussions of the possible mechanisms behind, and limits to, the transformations ascribed to Christian conversion. This review will highlight some of the areas in which these debates about the influence of Christianity have been most fully developed. First, however, we will briefly examine another important feature of the anthropology of Christianity literature: reflexive discussions concerned with the ways Christianity has shaped the discipline of Anthropology.

Christianity, Anthropology, and Modernity

Anthropology has long had a commitment to exploring the way its own western background has shaped its concepts, and in many cases shaped them in ways that make them inapplicable in the cross-cultural contexts in which they are used. Since the late 1970s, this impulse has seen practices of disciplinary self-reflection becoming routine, and this in turn has helped open the door to the anthropology of Christianity in two ways.

First, as we demonstrated by our own way of approaching matters in the last section, it has encouraged anthropologists to be willing to ask questions about their own practice, such as why they have for so long ignored the presence of a major world religion in the areas they study. Second, and this point provides the focus of this section, the reflexive turn has given the cultural study of aspects of the western tradition either in the West or abroad a new relevance to the discipline at large. In this spirit, one of the anthropology of Christianity's first successes has been in initiating widely read debates about both the Christian influence on anthropological thought itself – what Cannell (2005) has called 'The Christianity of Anthropology' – and, more broadly, about the Christian contribution to the formations of western modernity that have shaped the discipline.

One of the key themes in the discussion of the links between Christianity and anthropological thought has been the claim Christian ideas have constrained anthropological conceptions of religion more generally, and even of Christianity as it is practiced outside the liberal tradition in the West. The key voice in this discussion has been Asad (1993), who has argued that the anthropological view of religion has been colored in particular by the peculiar nature of Post-enlightenment Christianity. In comparison to earlier (especially medieval) forms of the religion, post-Enlightenment Christianity is characterized, Asad argues, by an at best limited role in the public sphere and a lack of access to police powers to enforce proper disciplinary modes of subject formation that were formerly particular to the religion. Banished from these larger social arenas, Christianity ceased to be defined by formal exterior practices, and instead became concerned with the internal, private assent to particular propositions understood as "belief." This emphasis has, in turn, been absorbed by anthropology, most notably for

Asad in Geertz's (1973) famous definition of religion, and has resulted in a disciplinary definition of ritual in terms of subjective meaning and of religion in terms of adherence to internalized representations. This argument has been taken up by others studying the anthropology of Christianity, and has led to the claim that modern Protestant definitions of religion as primarily a matter of belief can lead anthropologists to misrepresent not only the lives of people who practice other religions, but even those of many Christians whose engagement with their faith is not matched by an equal immersion in other facets of western modern culture (Keller 2005, Robbins 2007a, Kirsch 2004).

A second hypothesis concerning the relation between anthropology and Christianity holds that the link is less direct, having been mediated by western modernity, itself shaped by Christianity. The result of this indirect connection is a crypto-Christian influence in contemporary western forms of knowledge, including the social sciences. Within anthropology, perhaps the greatest contemporary exponent of a connection between Christianity, social science, and modernity is Sahlins (1996), who argues that many of modernity's most distinctive traits, such as the nature-culture divide, the valorization of economistic reasoning, the sense of society as an external, coercive force that is counter-posed against a natural, free individual, and the imagination of selfish desire as the animating force behind human action, all have their roots in the Biblical narrative of the Fall.

Contrary to Asad and Sahlins, who see internalized forms of Christianity as a hindrance to proper concept formation in anthropology, Burridge (1973) suggests that Christianity had provided necessary (though not sufficient) prerequisites for the formation of the discipline. For Burridge, the importance of Christianity extends beyond

the mere establishment of social institutions, such as missions, which engaged with cultural others. The religious content of Christianity was essential for the reflexivity and sociological perception that stand at the heart of anthropology, as Christianity “insisted that man step outside himself and view himself dispassionately (as God might) at the same time as it has decidedly affirmed the participatory life of interrelatedness in community” (1973, p. 12). Even in an era of anthropological suspicion of Christianity, the Christian trace continued in Burridge’s eyes, because anthropologists “have been and are imbued with missionary purpose” aimed at highlighting a shared humanity and promoting intercultural exchange (1973, p. 18). Burridge’s argument is idiosyncratic and has had little uptake in current debates. We note it here nonetheless because it deserves to be seen as an early entrant into the field of reflexive study of the Christian influence on anthropology, and indeed as one that grounds the very reflexivity upon which it depends on Christian ways of thinking about self-formation.

Christians qua Christians – problems in the ethnography of Christian Populations

Conversion: Continuity and Discontinuity

The observation that Christian conversion is often tightly linked to changing forms of sociality is not limited to anthropological discussions of Christianity. Those groups who have converted to this religion during the last century have also been quick to note that this process has brought about a transformation in social relations – a “complete break with the past” (Meyer 1998) – that they find impossible to ignore. It is this local sense of social discontinuity after the adoption of Christianity that this section will address.

Until recently, anthropologists have displayed a marked tendency to read Christianity outside the West as a form of syncretism, a continuation of previous forms of religious logic under a new, more cosmopolitan set of names. The problem with this picture is that according to current research, it is not in accord with the experience of those ‘convert cultures’ who have recently adopted some form of Christianity. From the standpoint of these Christians, and the anthropologists who document them, conversion is understood as point of rupture from a pre-Christian past, and a new orientation to a brighter future in which they will participate in a modern and global religious order (Meyer 1999a, Robbins 2004, Engelke 2004, Keller 2005, Keane 2007). That the upheavals of modernity and globalization should be thought through in terms of conversion to a ‘world’ religion like Christianity is perhaps unsurprising. However, the problem becomes more interesting when we include the possibility that Christianity is particularly well suited to allow those experiencing temporal and ontological transitions to thematize their experience of change. This is so because Christianity in many of its forms is a religion centered on sharp discontinuities, displayed in such elements as the incarnation, personal conversion, and the sometimes imminent apocalypse.

This trope of rupture, when utilized in local readings of the social, is rendered extremely complex by the way the transitions being indexed are usually only partial in nature; continued pre-Christian indigenous theories of society and politics (Robbins 2004), models of proper modes of exchange with and responsibility for kin (Keller 2005, Keane 2007, [Schram 2007](#)), and the continued belief in the power of pre-Christian spiritual entities (Meyer 1999a) often cause painful ethical, social, psychological, and representational conflicts for Christian populations in areas of relatively recent

conversion, such as Melanesia, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Indeed, the tension inherent in the dialectic between the advent of a new ‘Christian’ way of life and the continuation of cognitive and social forms that are thought to be inimical to Christianity has been a fertile object of research, and is likely to continue to be for some time.

As this tension between new Christian practices and prior non-Christian practices indicates, while conversion may mark a break, it does not necessarily mark an unproblematic reduplication of missionary beliefs in converted people. Rather, there is an inherent creativity in the process of (re)appropriation of Christian words and themes by those at the receiving end of missionary activity. For example, Meyer points out the way that the message of German Pietist missionaries was translated by Ewe converts into a form of Christianity that, at least in part, “evaded missionary control” (Meyer 1999a, p. 82). Christianity may be mobilized to re-imagine local cultural sensibilities in Christian terms that afford them a new ethical or political charge (Austin-Brooks 1997); or to give new ends to key local structures, as in peripheral populations that find in the religion a kind of prestigious foreign plunder similar to other cultural material and technological imports from the metropole (Rutherford 2003).

The presence of such localized readings and re-appropriations of the Christian message has led, in some cases, to the argument that Christianity ultimately cannot be understood as marking a sharp break with the past (e.g. Scott 2005). Since people in non-Christian cultural milieus never encounter the religion whole cloth, but rather in particular, disparate elements (shards of catechisms, hymns, and texts) that must be interpreted in relation to local cultural material, conversion in these contexts can only be understood in terms of continuity with pre-existing cultural forms. Furthermore, given

that these recent converts may not necessarily conceive of Christianity as a self-contained or internally consistent system, the 'ethno-theologies' forged by indigenous Christians must be seen as the work of theological bricoleurs, who seek to make sense of Christian claims through a series of juxtapositions with non-Christian material that radically alter the representations of Christianity as well as of local society. By stressing the idiosyncratic nature and entirely contingent grounding of 'Christian' understandings that are achieved within such a society, this claim places into question whether such ideas can constitute a sharp break in local logic in the same manner that conversion has been understood by others.

While not unreasonable, such arguments are vulnerable to several objections. First of all, they ignore the possibility that the adoption of Christianity is not simply a transformation or addition to local cultural material in the way of representation or ethics, but is also often a transformation in the way that subjects and communication are formally structured (Keane 2007, also see Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997). Second, this emphasis on local Christians as bricoleurs ignores the possibility that the hybrid readings they produce may allow them to enter larger, trans-cultural discussions with other self-identified Christians; participation in these larger discussions, even though they are initially made possible by hybrid readings, can have their own normative anti-syncretistic effects (Zehner 2005). Third, there is the question as to whether the shift in emphasis suggested by Scott would in practice result in merely an effective return to viewing forms of Christianity as syncretistic continuations of prior indigenous sensibilities. If the emphasis is solely on continuity rather than rupture, on local forms rather than trans-local commonalities, then Christianity as a comparative object

disintegrates in the face of an ‘object dissolving critique’ (Robbins 2003a, p. 193) – regardless of what the ethnographic subjects imagine their religious identity and allegiance to be. Finally, such approaches tend to discount the active work many converts do see their new Christian beliefs and practices as different from those of the past; in essence, they suggest that people are incapable of ever learning anything new (Robbins 2007a). In light of these concerns, it is perhaps most fair to suggest that approaches that rely on normal science anthropological ideas about the unyielding hold of traditional culture on people’s perceptions of the new may capture a single moment in a longer process of Christian cultural transformation, or one modality of it, but perhaps should not be taken as covering all stages or cases of conversion. More importantly, anthropological debates about the balance of continuity and change in convert cultures is likely in the future to be a key site in which broader anthropological models of cultural change come to be worked out.

Linguistic Practice, the Christian Person, and Individualism

One area in which the cultural and social break associated with Christian conversion has been most clearly documented is that of language use, language change, and the transformation of models of the speaking and hearing person. The special importance of language change in this regard is not surprising, given the particular emphasis that Christians place on language in their focus on the biblical text, their understanding of Christ as the Word, and the centrality of speech in Protestant ritual life and social understanding (see Ammerman 1987, Harding 2001, Crapanzano 2000, Robbins 2001, 2004). In addition to these factors, the emphasis contemporary anthropologists of

religion place on language as a mode of constructing the divine (Samaritan 1972, Rappaport 1979, 1999, Keane 1997a, Engelke 2007) makes this topic an increasingly central preoccupation in the emerging literature.

Many discussions of language and Christianity have focused on the way Christian models of the nature and use of language (its “language ideology”) stress the importance of truth-telling and sincerity in Christian speech, and on the assertion that the speaker’s intentionality plays the crucial role in the production of meaning that such an ethic of speech underlies (Keane 1997b, 2002, 2007, Robbins 2001, 2004, Schieffelin 2002, Shoaps 2001). Viewed cross-culturally, this particular language ideology is idiosyncratic, and one of the most developed bodies of research in the anthropology of Christianity has explored the way converts raised in language ideologies that stress other matters (such as politeness, indirection, poetic artistry, or formality) struggle to adopt these Christian tenets (Keane 2002, Robbins 2007b, Schieffelin 2007). More broadly, one of the first major collections of work in the anthropology of Christianity has focused on the ways that, on the basis of these kinds of ideas about language, Christians find themselves compelled to find the world religiously meaningful at all times and in all particulars – learning to interpret it for the sincere intentions that determine its shape (Engelke and Tomlinson 2006). This too can constitute a change for converts whose previous outlooks were more tolerant of ignorance and absurdity, or placed less emphasis on a hermeneutical approach to daily life.

Christian language ideology not only shapes the way Christians produce and interpret messages, it also goes a long way toward defining the nature of the Christian self (Stromberg 1993, Harding 2001). The role of language in the creation of the

converted self is central to Csordas' (2001) discussion of the Catholic charismatic renewal, and Harding (2001) has gone so far as to note that for the fundamentalist Christians she studied conversion is understood to be a matter of producing correct speech – as she nicely puts it, for them “speaking is believing.” Looking at other ritual contexts, anthropologists have also shown how preaching (and listening to sermons) (Engelke 2007, Robbins 2004), praying (Shoaps 2002, Keane 2002, Robbins 2001), studying the word (Keller 2005, Bielo forthcoming, Crapanzano 2000), and verbal confession (Robbins 2004), are central to the construction of Christian personhood.

Across these various contexts of language use, a set of broad themes are in play that make Christian personhood paradigmatic of that formation of personhood scholars recognize as individualism. Indeed, although not always focused on the speaking subject, many analyses of Christianity as an ethnographic object have been offered under the aegis of Weber's classic connection of Protestantism to individualism. Dumont (1986) has been the most influential anthropologist to have taken this up. He treats individualism as a value, a cultural focus on the construction above all else of saved individuals who owe their salvation to no one but themselves and God. In his analysis, the individual who stands alone before God is the paradigm of “the independent, autonomous, and thus essentially non-social moral being who carries our [the west's] paramount values” (Dumont 1986, p. 25).

As we will show in what follows, individualism is anchored in Christian ideas about more than just language, and is influential across many domains of Christian life. We have chosen to discuss it first in relation to Christian language ideology because the ideal Christian speaker provides such a clear example of the kind of individual Christians

often want to make of themselves. This is most evident in the way that Christian models of speech highlight the individual subject as the moral point of origin of meaning – a nonsocial point of origin to the extent that they alone produce meanings, do so without regard for their interlocutors (as in previous western models that saw speech as about deference and politeness – Burke 1987), and are responsible for its sincerity and truth (Keane 2007, Robbins 2001). Allied to this are overriding concerns for linguistically disembedding actors as individuals from their collective pasts by producing new forms of speech and even new vocabularies to sharply demarcate the present from the past and herald new temporalities (Schiefflin 2002). Thus the individualization that is linked to Christian conversion and marked in Christian speech is often one of the most salient indexes of the discontinuity with the pre-conversion self and society noted by Christians and analysts alike.

Christian Political Formations: Gender and Race

In addition to shifting language ideologies, and despite the abovementioned fact that anthropologists often find Christians frustratingly a-political, the individualizing force of Protestantism can contribute to a critique of human power in both family and state politics. This happens because Christian conversion shifts the primary locus of obligation away from lateral social bonds among consociates toward dyadic bonds between an individual and a divine *alter*. Once this shift takes place, relationships with both peers and human superiors become less important than an individual's relationship with God, and are therefore subjected to the tenets of Christianity over against the obligations of social relationships (Burridge 1973). To take one example from Africa,

Pentecostal conversion in Malawi has presented a challenge to gerontocratic power, as young people are able to circumvent traditional paths to authority through life experience and instead mobilize the power of the Holy Spirit to command a following while still in their youth (van Dijk 1992). The subordination of human relationships and obligations to divine authority therefore serves not only to individualize the Christian subject, but to empower him or her to challenge existing social hierarchies by emphasizing the equality of all people before God (see also Errington and Gewertz 1995).

Another instance of this critique of standing political situations is seen in the differences between recently converted Brazilian Protestants and their Catholic neighbors. These new converts, who are largely Pentecostal, draw on their belief in an individual's accountability to God to stand in opposition to government officials they may see as "[tools] of the Devil." In contrast, Catholics in the same community, for whom individualism is not such an integral part of Christianity, are more inclined to "think in conciliatory terms" when it comes to the question of political responsibility (Burdick 1993, p. 218).

That the individualizing force of particular kinds of Christianity empowers people to subvert existing authority structures is also evident in the challenge that Protestant conversion presents to traditional gender relationships, particularly in Latin America. In this part of the world, women who convert to Protestantism are often empowered to offer a critique of male behaviors that do not conform to Christian norms (Brusco 1993). They do so on the basis of their new moral orientation under a faith that treats them as individuals primarily responsible to God, and only secondarily to the authority of men, and their case is strengthened by the fact that Christian norms are generally oppose male

prestige activities – drinking, gambling, promiscuity – that work against the interests of women and of family life (Brusco 1993, Mariz and Machado 1997, Smilde 1997, [2007](#), also see Austin-Broos 1997). Paradoxically, while Pentecostalism enables women converts to step away from particular social obligations toward male authority, the same moral critique that affords them a degree of individual autonomy works to re-embed male converts in their network of family and social relations. Among Latin American Protestants, Martin (1995) has found that, when men convert to Pentecostalism and abandon such vices as gambling, drinking, and extra-marital relationships, thereby freeing up funds they can then channel back into the home. They also embrace the role of male breadwinner, and “put the family back together as an effective unit of economic co-operation” (Martin 1995, p. 107, cf. Maxwell 1998, p. 353). In this context, Christianity not only serves to challenge existing relationships of power or socially acceptable ideas of authority through the individualization of its subject, but in so doing it alters social relationships in such a way as to connect people to other institutions of modernity, including the market, to which we now turn.

(post) modern Christian economies

While the above example of gendered sin and economically advantageous redemption illustrates the capacity of Christianity to facilitate market participation by re-embedding its adherents in a network of financial obligations, this Latin American pattern is unusual in discussions of the relationship between Christianity and the market. Most anthropological discussions of Christianity have instead emphasized the way that it fosters market participation among its adherents through the familiar process of

individualization that we have been discussing. The individualizing force of Protestantism is, of course, a crucial tenet of Weber's spirit of capitalism, and the elective affinity between Christian conversion and market participation has figured prominently in anthropological analysis. For example, discussions of Pentecostalism in Africa have highlighted the way that the abovementioned trope of rupture, of breaking with one's past, contributes to the severing of kinship ties and the economic obligations that come with them, thereby freeing believers to participate more fully in emerging market economies (Meyer 1998, 1999b, van Dijk 1998, cf. Annis 1987). Similarly, historical analyses of missionization have been quick to point out the relationship between the Christianization of a community and its parallel integration into the capitalist market (e.g. Pels 1999, Meyer 1999a, 1999b, Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997). Protestant conversion is also connected to more contemporary market participation in the way it inculcates particular behaviors that are useful in the flexible labor conditions of the post-Fordist economy (Martin 1995, 1998), and generates "redemptive uplift" by promoting literacy and leading believers to shun credit (Maxwell 1998, p. 354).

With these links between capitalism and Christianity kept well in view, a number of anthropologists have begun to analyze the fantastic growth of the prosperity gospel, or "faith gospel," in Pentecostal circles around the world. This form of Pentecostal Christianity turns on the notion that small gifts given to God – often called "seed faith" offerings (see de Boeck 2004, p. 198) – will cause him to lavish extravagant blessings on the believer in return. These mechanisms are easily placed into a capitalist framework – seed faith offerings are often described as "investments" (e. g. Ukah 2005, p. 263), the promised blessings as "dividends" and "miraculous [returns]" (Comaroff and Comaroff

2000, p. 315), and the faith gospel itself as “an elaborate transaction” (Ukah 2005, p. 263). Adherents to the prosperity gospel often appear “intensely entrepreneurial” (Martin 1995, p. 115) – witness the Nigerian businessmen who find in prosperity churches not only a form of Christianity that complements their sense of capitalist vocation, but a ready platform for the promotion of their products (Ukah 2005). Alternately, for the millions of prosperity adherents unable to effectively enter the market, the faith gospel represents an attempt to supernaturally access the wealth of the world economy when conventional modes of participation fail (Gifford 2001, 2004, Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2000, 2002). In the prosperity gospel, then, it seems we have a new Protestant ethic to match a new, neoliberal spirit of capitalism. In an era when consumption is the driving force of the market, rather than its “hallmark disease” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002, p. 111), the prosperity gospel appears to be an appropriate Christian counterpart, as a religion in which personal wealth, as opposed to diligence and inner-worldly asceticism, indexes salvation.

However, while there is undoubtedly a relationship between the faith gospel and individual participation in the capitalist market, several discussions of this form of Pentecostalism have emphasized the ways in which it is re-embedding its adherents in social networks rather than encouraging them to see themselves as unencumbered selves seeking riches by selling their labor on the market (e.g. van Dijk 2002, 2005). These observations not only problematize the notion that Protestantism more often than not runs contrary to the existing networks of social obligation; by illustrating the capacity of Christianity to work against capitalist individualism, such interpretations also relate the prosperity gospel to non-capitalist forms of exchange. The circulation of words and

things among prosperity believers in Sweden, for example, is characterized by the inalienability of these gifts, which in turn creates something of a de facto gift economy among these followers of the faith gospel (Coleman 2004, 2006). Indeed, much of the language of prosperity preachers is shot through with references to quintessentially Maussian notions of debt-incurring, relationship-generating gifts. The pastor of Nigeria's Redeemed Christian Church of God encourage people to, "do something special to God that will compel Him to do more than what He wanted to do for them" (qtd. in Ukah 2005, p. 262), and Filipino followers of the Catholic prosperity El Shaddai movement "become initiators of [a] reciprocal relationship with God," and in so doing "lay claims to the power of God by indebting God to them" (Wiegele 2005, p. 9). Prosperity believers are urged to "[sacrifice] all they can to the movement" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, p. 314) in prestations of widow's mites that may force open the windows of heaven. This emphasis on exchange relationships among prosperity believers therefore indicates that the elective affinity between Christianity and capitalism is by no means a foregone conclusion. Rather, even those forms of Christianity which seem most committed to individual capitalist accumulation, such as the prosperity gospel, merit a non-capitalist reexamination, particularly as the promises of capitalist prosperity ring increasingly hollow for many believers (Meyer 2004, p. 460).

Christianity, Plurality and (again) Modernity

'Un-modern' gift economies such as we have just discussed require un-modern subjects. However, this anti-modern aspect of Christianity is not limited to exchange alone; it is important for us to relate in closing the anti- or counter- modern aspects of Christianity to

the individuating and modernizing aspects previously discussed. As we shall see, the fact that Christianity can serve at once as a vector for modernity and as counter-narrative to modernity not only emphasizes the relative autonomy of Christianity as a cultural complex, but it also underscores how multifarious Christianity is as an anthropological object. This awkward positionality of Christianity is also related to the manner in which certain voices have been arguably precluded from contributing to the emerging discussion of the anthropology of Christianity – and therefore brings us full circle to the issue of institutional barriers to the anthropology of Christianity and the question of the Christian influence on anthropological practice itself. To illustrate this, we begin with a discussion of Christianity's counter-modern aspects.

Perhaps due to the tendency during the late 20th and early 21st century for Christians, and particularly Protestants, to devote themselves to what at first blush may be characterized as reactionary political projects in Europe and North America (see, e.g., Ginsburg 1998, Harding 2001, Coleman 2005), it primarily has been ethnographers working in these localities who have framed Christianity as a self-consciously anti-modern project of subject formation (Ammerman 1987, Coleman 2000, Harding 2001, Csordas 2001, Crapanzano 2001, Harding and Stewart 2004, Ault 2004), and concomitantly, have attested to the decentered construction of subjects (Stromberg 1993, Csordas 1994, 2001, Coleman 2004, 2006, [Faubion 2001](#), Luhrmann 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006; [for parallel descriptions of decentered or disjunctive economic or philanthropic North American Christian subjects, see Bialecki 2008, Bielo 2007, Elisha 2008](#)). The specificities of the underlying mechanisms that create these non-modern subjectivities have varied in different accounts, ranging from phenomenological models of embodied

cultural practices (Csordas 1994), claims predicated on a capacity for trance inherent in the human psyche (Luhmann 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006), or processes of self-narration (Stromberg 1993, Harding 2001).

These accounts of non-modern subjectivities and anti-modern politics seemingly complicate other overarching narratives in the anthropology of Christianity that would emphasize a parallel, if not an identity or a causal nexus, between Christianity and other individuating social processes. However, there is a way in which these two seemingly conflictual tendencies can be harmonized. The individuating force of Christianity seems strongest in ‘convert cultures,’ (Robbis 2007a) where Christianity is marked as an imported foreign object that believers must come to terms with, while Christianity is more likely to be invoked to oppose the social forces that are collectively read as ‘modernity’ in societies where Christianity has been present for a longer duration, and the ‘break’ in Christian history is read as part of a transition from Christian to post-Christian rather than the inverse (e.g. Coleman 2000). This is not surprising – as both Donham (1999) and Friedman (2007, p. 427) have observed, forms of Christianity that look fiercely anti-modern when seen in the context of the developed West appear to be strong upholders of modernity when placed in other contexts; Keane (2007) has also noted that Protestantism functions in the interstitial space between non-modern practices and a fully realized secular modernity. This situated difference does not necessarily mean that we should read these differently located Christianities as entirely unrelated constructs, however. What is common to all these descriptions of counter-modern Christianity is that, while sharing similarities to the individuating structures of subjectivity observed in convert-cultures, these forms of Christianity foreground a different aspect of that

structure. Rather than highlighting how a relationship with the divine functions to disembed the subject from lateral social ties for new believers, as occurs in 'individualizing' Christianities, in areas where both modernity and Christianity has long taken hold what is emphasized is the way in which a hierarchical relationship with a transcendent other foregrounds the dependent and contingent nature of the individual in relation to that authority. This latter, equally Christian formulation stands in sharp contrast with the self-identical heroic subject valued in many streams of modernity.

The fact that Christianity can at once be read as championing modernity and challenging it is indicative of Christianity's deep heterogeneity. This heterogeneity means that numerous different forms of Christianity have to be accounted for, a project that the ethnography of Christianity has only begun to undertake; many forms of Christianity have yet to be fully addressed. To date, it is Pentecostalism that has been the chief recipient of (a perhaps inordinate amount of) anthropological attention, which Howell (2003) suggests has affected analytic trends and prevented anthropologists from discovering how other Christian religious traditions may have handled the problematics of social transformation that we have covered here. Particularly lacking is self-conscious comparative work on non-charismatic forms of Catholicism (but see Mosse 2006, Cannell 1999) and Eastern Orthodox Christianity (but see Caldwell 2004). At the same time, this heterogeneity has also created space for anthropologists such as Cannell (2005), who's project it has been to use the open nature of the occurring constellations of Christian ideology and practice to reframe the questions of the anthropology of Christianity in terms other than a dialectic between the imminent and the transcendent. [A similar push for heterogeneity not only in subject matter, but in analytic practice has been](#)

made by Chris Hann (2007), who has not only critiqued the Anthropology of Christianity for its already noted failure to address Eastern Orthodox inflected forms of Religious practice. Hann has suggested (in a way reminiscent of the point made by Asad before there was an Anthropology of Christianity) that the current form of the Anthropology of Christianity is also too dominated by an idealist mode of analysis that is historically derived from the Protestant tradition, and which often is often mirrored in the Protestant populations that the Anthropology of Christianity takes as its object. Only by including these other forms of Christianity, as well as engaging in problem-orientated comparative conversations with the anthropologists of other religions traditions, can we grasp and unpack the full range of Christian heterogeneity, according to Hann.

Christian heterogeneity is a challenge for more than anthropologists, however; it is also a challenge for Christianity's stated project of forging a global ecumene. From an anthropological perspective, this means that moments of incommensurability between differing Christian groups, and attempts to overcome this apparent incommensurability, are also a proper object of study, not just in the historic mission encounter, but in the global flows of the contemporary world as well (Howell 2003, Priest 2006). In our examination of that Christians (who are tautologically influenced by their own logic) make sense of alterity, we should not be surprised if their thought traces contours similar to those found in the anthropological struggle with questions of cultural difference; this especially should be expected when we consider the influence Christianity has had on the discipline. Given this fact, there remains the possibility that the work done by Christian intellectuals focused on understanding issues of similarity and difference among various by Christian groups may assist anthropologists in thinking through some of the

challenges that anthropology faces (Robbins 2006). Until this point, however, just as anthropology has previously marginalized Christianity as an object of study, it has also marginalized Christian thinkers, including Christian anthropologists – insisting that they refrain from bringing their Christian identities to bear on their work aimed at an anthropological audience. Such a move runs counter to the reflexive trend in the discipline mentioned earlier, which has seen many other anthropologists in the last several decades come to link their personal backgrounds very successfully to their research foci (see Priest 2001, Howell 2007). The absence of such a link in the work of Christian anthropologists has largely prevented a particularly motivated population from fully engaging in, and contributing a valuable perspective to, an incipient anthropology of Christianity and has until recently further contributed to the anthropological neglect of the subject (Howell 2007).

So once again, the study of Christianity, in addition to opening up a rich empirical field, and addressing a force shaping the global flow of material and ideologies, holds out the possibility for benefiting not just those engaged in this particular, quickly evolving sub-discipline of the anthropology of religion, but of helping clarify and strengthen the discipline as a whole.

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