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Missionaries and anthropologists

Sjaak van der Geest, a missionary turned anthropologist, has raised some interesting points about the relationship between these two often co-intruding figures in alien societies. His article, 'Anthropologists and missionaries: brothers under the skin' (*Man* (N.S.) 25: 508-601) was particularly interesting to me as an anthropologist who studied missionaries for my doctoral dissertation (Rapport 1954). Van der Geest points out that anthropologists have tended to exaggerate the contrasts between themselves and missionaries, and that some of this may stem from an Oedipal rebelliousness on the part of members of the younger profession against their paternal forebears in the field. Really, he suggests in his sub-title, we are 'brothers under the skin'.

Van der Geest notes that in the literature, the contrasts which emerge take the form of stereotypical oppositions between anthropologists as conservers and missionaries as converters; between anthropologists as doubters and missionaries as knowers; and between anthropologists as listeners and missionaries as preachers. Against this, Van der Geest presents the unrecognised similarities – with both anthropologists and missionaries functioning as propagators of a worldview, and both engaged in an outward-bound thrust into exotic cultures requiring an ability to live under field conditions and to form personal ties to communicate in their work.

I agree with much of what Van der Geest says, but would argue on the basis of my own

experience with missionaries that his descriptions and interpretations of the perceived dissonance between practitioners of the two enterprises is specific rather than generic. The ideal of the brotherhood of human society can be shared by both missionaries and anthropologists. But, I suggest (with Reinhold Niebuhr) that there are diverse strategies for seeking this ideal. Blurring the differences by suggesting that dissonances stem from psychopathology may not be the best way to recognise common ground for potential collaboration.

In my experience, differences in the orientations of specific missionaries are a matter not simply of personal style, but also of formal creed and organizational structure. Furthermore, the relationship between anthropologists and missionaries depends not only on occupational lineage, but also on the relations between public and private spheres of each in relation to their formal professional roles.

In the area where I carried out my research, among a band of off-reservation Navahos, there were many missionaries. I had significant contacts with three of them: the first was Catholic, the second Mormon, and the third represented a fundamentalist sect which I called 'Galilean'.

The Catholic mission was a Franciscan establishment on the main reservation itself; it was where Father Berard Haile carried out his outstanding linguistic and religious studies. Anthropologists universally respected the work of Father Berard, and cited it as befitting his status as a recognized scholar (cf. Kluckhohn and Leighton 1948; Vogt and Albert 1966). He, for one, did not feel the need to polarise the missionary's aim of studying the language to convert the Indians and the anthropologist's aim of studying the language for linguistic or ethnological purposes. He combined the two without conflict.

At the other pole were the Galileans, whose work with the language was only for the purpose of rendering the gospel in terms understandable to the Indians. The Galilean missionary regarded Navaho traditional beliefs and practices as pagan superstitions, and the anthropologist's interest in them as implying condonement and therefore some kind of collusion with the Devil.

The Mormons were different again. Mormon missionaries were neither the scholar-priests of the Catholic monastic orders, nor were they the evangelical careerists of the sects. Every committed Mormon is a 'latter day saint' and is expected to do missionary work for two years, preferably among an exotic people. They regard the American Indians as lost tribes of Israel, to whom they are bringing the good news from the Book of Mormon as transcribed from golden tablets dug up by Joseph Smith in Palmyra, New York, in 1837. The good news is of the Second Coming of Christ, in which he revealed that Zion would be in the New World. The Mormons I met tended to enjoy discussions with anthropol-

ogists, whom they regarded as fellow students of tribal history.

Thus, in the course of my fieldwork, I sought professional enlightenment from the Franciscans, was able to find enjoyment in the company of the Mormons, and tried to avoid confrontations with the Galileans.

These and the myriad other missionaries to the Indians tended to operate in a manner consistent with the American culture in which they were immersed, in an entrepreneurial and consumerist framework. Each missionary presented a version of the gospel to the Indians for their consideration. Though some of the missionaries operated with a degree of informal territoriality, there was minimal co-ordination or communication among them, either doctrinally or in terms of social policy.

More recently I have become interested in missionaries in South Africa. Here, too, I am impressed with the *spectrum* of church orientations. There are the Dominicans like Father Alfred Nolan (1988), who with his colleagues at the Institute of Contextual Theology have been influenced by the liberation theologians mentioned by Van der Geest, and who are engaged at the Institute in social scientific research of a professional calibre. Then there are the mainstream Protestant denominations. Within this part of the spectrum there is the contrast between the liberal Anglicans who have produced a Black archbishop, and the Dutch Reform Church whose doctrines until recently have supported apartheid. Then there are the Pentecostals and other evangelicals, many of whom represent syncretic movements combining traditional African and Western elements. Some of these have been studied by anthropologists (Sundkler 1971 [1948]; West 1975; Kuper 1987). It is my impression that there has been considerable diversity, both in the orientation of the different missionaries to the Africans, and also in their relations with anthropologists.

Another point has to do with the time dimension. Some of the contemporary missionaries resemble nineteenth century churchmen in their orientations to traditional African culture, and correlatively to anthropologists. Others, by contrast, are extremely modern in their orientation. In citing attitudes and relationships it is important to pin down both the type of missionary and the time period. To refer to them in an undifferentiated 'ethnological present' can be misleading.

The way orientations can change is seen in a recent paper by Mitchell (1990). Referring to the missionary aspect of the work of John Colenso (1814-83), the first Bishop of Natal, Mitchell describes how Colenso learned from the Zulu natives who were helping him with the translation of the *Pentateuch*, the first volume of which was published in 1862. Colenso's discussions with natives led him to reflect more carefully than he had previously done on the Genesis account of

the Flood. Mitchell quotes from a letter that Colenso addressed (but never sent) to Dr Harold Browne, Professor of Divinity at Cambridge:

Here, however, as I said, amidst my work in this land, I have been brought face to face with the very questions which I then put by. While translating the story of the Flood, I have had a simple-minded, but intelligent native – one with the docility of a child, but the reasoning powers of mature age – look up and ask, ‘Is all that true? Do you really believe that all this happened thus, – that all the beasts, and birds, and creeping things, upon the earth, large and small, from hot countries and cold, came thus by pairs, and entered into the ark with Noah? And did Noah gather food for them all, for beasts and birds of prey, as well as the rest?’ My heart answered in the words of the Prophet, ‘Shall a man speak lies in the name of the Lord?’ (Zech. xii.3). But I was thus driven, – against my will at first, I may truly say – to search deeply into these questions; and I have since done so, to the best of my power, with the means at my disposal, in this colony. And now I tremble at the result of my enquiries.

When Colenso eventually takes up discussion of the Noah story, he states that if taken literally, 1,658 known species of mammalia, 6,266 of birds, 642 of reptiles, and 550,000 of insects would have had to have been housed, fed and kept clean in the ark for over twelve months. There were further practical questions. How did Noah catch them? How did the wingless bird of New Zealand find its way home again? How did fresh water fish survive the salt water? At that time, Bishop Colenso encountered mass opposition and ridicule, not least from his ecclesiastical colleagues by whom he was eventually tried for heresy when he refused to withdraw his work. The time dimension is important, not only because Colenso was operating in the pre-anthropological generation, but also because his observations would not be likely to lead to a heresy trial today.

Both diversity and change are visible in contemporary missionary work. In the Dutch Reform Church, the dissenting pastor Beyers Naude was deprived of a living as recently as the 1970s for his rejection of the Afrikaners’ theological justification of the doctrine of apartheid, which was monolithically supported within his church (Naude 1968). In 1990, a national conference of churches, including the DRC, publicly renounced the *sin* of apartheid, and one delegate referred to Beyers Naude as ‘the closest thing to a living South African Saint’.

Finally, I would like to discuss some of Van der Geest’s reasons for the existence of tensions between anthropologists and missionaries. He notes that anthropologists are doubters whereas missionaries are believers, and implies that anthropologists might actually do better work, particularly in the study of religion, if the dichot-

omy were removed. Missionaries, he argues, may be better placed to understand informants’ perspectives on religion through their being believers themselves, and he goes on to note that some anthropologists who have made outstanding contributions to the study of religion, such as Evans-Pritchard, were practising Christians. This analysis is, in my opinion, flawed in two respects.

First, as indicated above, religious belief may have the effect of closing the mind to a respectful consideration of other religions, as well as of attuning it. It depends on the religion and the era. I have encountered a similar argument in other areas of research, and find it equally dubious when it is applied to the study of psychotics, of children, of women, of blacks, gays, or of working class people by researchers lacking these characteristics.

Secondly, it is important to distinguish between the characteristics of the missionary role and the anthropological role as professions. With the missionary, beliefs and practices in the public and private spheres of his life are expected to be *isomorphic*. If an individual’s private doubts about the existence of God are very pronounced, he cannot function as a missionary without severe personal conflict. Being an anthropologist, by contrast, may allow a high degree of *heteromorphism* as between private and public spheres of belief. An anthropologist may practise his or her profession creditably while holding a very wide range of private convictions, even including anti-academic, anti-scientific views. Indeed, the obverse injunction to Van der Geest’s argument would seem to hold – namely, that you can do your job better if you control your personal biases and differentiate your private convictions from your professional work. This does not mean that you should not have or should deny your convictions. It does mean, however, that you can do equally creditable work as an anthropologist if you are motivated and trained, whether you are religious or atheist; marxist or thatcherite; gay or straight; black or white, male or female. The key anthropological orientation is not doubting *per se* but, as Shweder (1991) argues, the naturalist’s combination of curiosity, astonishment, sympathy and enthusiasm. ‘Anthropologists encounter witchcraft trials, suttee, ancestral spirit attack, fire walking, body mutilation, the dream time, and how do they react? With astonishment. While others respond with horror, outrage, condescension or lack of interest.’ These others, as I have noted, include missionaries.

As for the sympathy that Van der Geest seems to have for Van Oss’s crude Freudian interpretation of the roots of anthropologists’ ambivalence toward missionaries – i.e. that as ‘the anthropologist’s father’ the missionary attracts an Oedipal orientation – this is surely a particular preoccupation. Missionaries represent only one root of modern ethnography, others being explorers, classicists, naturalists, doctors and lawyers. Furthermore, scepticism about formal religiosity,

particularly in its evangelical forms, is not a peculiarity of anthropologists. Social scientists across the whole spectrum of disciplines show this scepticism as part of a secular positivist orientation.

Perhaps, as Van der Geest implies, there lurks within many anthropologists an unacknowledged missionary, just as there may be questioning anthropologists hidden in the breasts of many modern missionaries. To the extent that this is so, their respective approaches to modern religious phenomena need not be as much at odds as they have sometimes been. Be this as it may, the relationship between the curious missionary and the apostolic anthropologist is more likely to be fruitful if there is a recognition of the diversities and commonalities both within and between their professions.

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The main purpose of my article (Van der Geest 1990) was to confront – and, I hope, to disturb – my anthropological colleagues with their stereotypes concerning missionaries. In their picture of the missionary, anthropologists have beautifully summarised what they are most troubled about in their own profession: their unresolved metaphysical stand, their continued colonialism, their ethnographic mediocrity, and their inability to meet the ‘native’. The message of my sermon was that anthropologists should be ‘suspicious of their own suspicion towards missionaries’, to use Pels’s (1990: 103) phrase. I am aware that the article, as a ritual of role reversal, produced its

own stereotypes and needed hyperboles to achieve its goal, and I gratefully accept Robert Rapoport’s comments on this point.

Missionaries sensitive to anthropological critique were quite pleased with the reversed picture I drew of them, and they invited me on two occasions to publish the paper in one of their journals, which was of course exactly what I did not want. It would have spoiled the purpose of the paper and fed the anthropological prejudice towards missionaries.

My attempt to publish the text in an anthropological journal met with stiff reaction at first: the opening sentence of an anonymous reviewer of one journal left little doubt about the reason behind the refusal: ‘I intensely disliked this essay. I found it distorted, speciously argued, making very questionable use of supposed authorities, and basically simply an attempt to promote Christian organized religion by trying to undermine anthropology’. The closing sentence was no less revealing: ‘I see that the moral majority is now entering our anthropological journals’. The reviewer had seen his or her own face in the mirror and turned away in disgust.

Rapoport’s advice to distinguish between types of missionary and time period is of course well taken. As I said, with a reference to Salomone, missionaries vary enormously as do anthropologists: fundamentalists and agnostics may be found among either group. No doubt, such diversity is also due to differences in training, denomination and era. It is to Rapoport’s credit that he himself pointed out differences in style and doctrine between missionary groups in his dissertation about the Navaho as early as 1954.

Another important point in Rapoport’s comment is that he disagrees with my view that believers are better equipped for understanding religion than non-believers. We thus find ourselves in an old debate concerning whether the insider or the outsider is in a better position to practise anthropology. The answer of course is that both have their advantages and disadvantages. In the case of religion, however, I am inclined to support Schmidt (cited by Evans-Pritchard 1965: 121), who argues that the non-believer ‘will talk about religion as a blind man might of colours’. I am interested in what such an extreme outsider has to say about colours, but to reach a deeper understanding, I prefer the observations of those who can see the colours.

Rapoport writes that the missionary’s private and public beliefs have to be the same whereas the anthropologist can afford to hold different convictions in personal and professional domains. I am afraid that he slightly underestimates the missionary’s skill to accommodate contradictory beliefs, and that he grossly overestimates the anthropologist’s ability to separate his personal faith from his professional work. That is what I wanted to convey by choosing Jarvie’s (1984: 3) line as a motto to my essay: ‘Metaphysical issues underpin

most if not all scientific work'. The popularity of metaphors in anthropology – and in religious anthropology in particular – is significant: the anthropologist using them desperately attempts to reconcile the odd beliefs of others with his own conviction.

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