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Comment on R. J. Priest “Missionary positions: Christian, modernist, postmodernism”

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If it is true, as Robert Priest asserts, that the expression ‘missionary position’ came into existence through Kinsey’s slovenliness (one wonders how accurate the remainder of his book is), we should be grateful to Kinsey, because he provided us with an irresistible metaphor. I say “If it is true”, because I would not be surprised if – in spite of Priest’s meticulous search – one day an old ethnographic text crops up in which this coital position is indeed coined ‘missionary’.

Why is this metaphor irresistible? Because it joins two worlds within one image which in ‘real life’ hardly tolerate one another. It flourishes on the soil of one of the most powerful classic figures of style: the *contradictio*. A missionary having sex! It is both shocking and amusing. From its beginning, this expression was destined for success. Priest’s long list of titles from articles, books and seminars bears testimony to its popularity. And so does his own essay. There is only one thing which can halt its popularity: its overuse and it becoming a cliché. In fact that phase may have been reached after publication of his essay.

Priest should be commended for his clever way of bending the ‘missionary position’ back to suit those who love to use it – I mean the metaphor. Popular among anthropologists because of its criticising and ridiculing capacity towards missionaries and their ethnocentrism, the expression shows its boomerang effect, revealing the complacency and intellectual ethnocentrism of the anthropologists themselves (cf. Van der Geest 1990).

Unfortunately for our discussion, the European whose sexual movements were ridiculed by the Trobrianders was neither a missionary nor an anthropologist but a Greek buccaneer (Malinowski 1929: 284). Malinowski even knows his name: Nicholas Minister. (Hey! ‘Minister’! Could this be a clue?). Why did they not imitate the wooden movements of the anthropologist staying in their midst? My tentative answer follows in the next paragraphs.

There are at least three aspects of fieldwork on which anthropologists are less than informative: their tagging along with missionaries, their sex life, and their defecation. Priest’s essay playfully deals with two of these topics.

There may be several reasons to account for anthropologists’ lack of openness on these subjects. One, I suspect, is that revelation of these practices in their daily life in the field would not enhance their carefully built-up image of being almost integrated members of the community where they conduct their research. Anthropologists in the field had and still have much more contact with missionaries than they like to admit in their publications. They enjoyed the missionary’s company, his beer and his toilet.

And why so taciturn about sex? I have pondered this for a long time. Could it be prurience, cowardliness, disgust, racism, anxiety about relatives at home, inhibition to expose intimate experiences, fear of disease, methodological strategy, or simply the fact that they had no sex life to speak of? Only dreams and desires? Evans-Pritchard

(1976: 240) writes that his teacher Seligman told him “to take ten grains of quinine every night and to keep off women.” The almost complete absence of any reference to the sexual part of participant observation (for some exceptions, see: Cesara 1982, Krumeich 1994, Kulick & Willson 1995, Markowitz & Ashkenazi 1999) makes one wonder about the anthropological position.

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