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Anthropology and Missionaries

A Review Essay

Anton Quack

I

L. Plotnicov, one of the editors of this new, brief publication, "Anthropology's Debt to Missionaries" (Plotnicov et al. 2007),¹ writes in the Preface: "[the editors] are among those who considered missionaries to have been inadequately represented in the construction of anthropology's history ... This volume is offered partly to correct and amend the historical record, partly to recognize that the ethnographic record and anthropological linguistics would be vastly poorer without missionary research efforts, and because the neglect of acknowledgment where it is due is unfair" (viii). These words highlight the purpose and task of this publication as well as those to whom the book is addressed, in the first place those anthropologists who recount the history of their discipline and in the process address the issue of the anthropologist/missionary relationship. They are then faced precisely with the question of the contribution which missionaries have made to anthropology in the development of the history they are writing.

According to the "Acknowledgments," the book is not just the result of the "invited session" held during the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association of 2005. Nor does this publication claim to be the last word on the subject nor is it a balanced geographic coverage of the topic, possibly because many of those invited to the symposium were not able to make it at the time and others wanted to publish their contribution elsewhere.

The ten essays which make up this book deal primarily with Middle and North America, with Papua New Guinea, and with India. The time frame goes from the 16th century (Las Casas, Sahagún) over the 18th century (Lafitau) to the 21st century (Melanesian Institute). A quick glance over these essays shows how different they are in size, style, content, and quality.

John Barker's "Missionary Ethnography on the Northwest Coast" (1–22) investigates the comparatively meager amount of ethnographic material that

1 Plotnicov, Leonard, Paula Brown, and Vinson Sutlive (eds.): *Anthropology's Debt to Missionaries*. Pittsburgh: Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, 2007. 185 pp. ISBN 978-0-945428-14-5. Price: \$ 20.00.

was published during the time of Christian mission work in the 19th century on the Northwest Coast of America. Hugo G. Nutini, in all too few lines, reflects on the great missionaries Bernardino de Sahagún and Bartolomé de las Casas, as well as on Vasco de Quiroga, who is much less well-known, but who contributed mightily to anthropology long before this was established as a formal study (“The Contributions of Mendicant Friars to Mesoamerican Ethnography”; 23–29).

The Jesuit Michael F. Steltenkamp, in his article “Updating *The Jesuit Relations*” (31–45), gives a brief and somewhat superficial description of the double role as missionary and anthropologist which some Jesuits adopted following the example of Lafitau in North America: DeSmet, Craft (he was a Jesuit for only a brief time), Buechel, Doll, Bucko, Starkloff, Steinmetz; the author Steltenkamp did not really like to exclude himself from this company – a kind of modesty which is not all that common anymore! In her contribution “Fr. Berard Haile, O. F. M., Anthropologist and Franciscan Missionary” (46–63), Charlotte J. Frisbie pays tribute to an exceptional friar and missionary who rendered outstanding service with his work and study of the Navaho language and culture. His advice was much sought after by the appropriate anthropological circles of his time, as the impressive list of names shows (62).

In his article “William Cameron Townsend and Missionary Linguistics” (64–85), William Svelmoe describes the beginnings of the “Wycliffe Bible Translators” (WBT) and the “Summer Institute of Linguistics” (SIL). This effort has become world-famous for its work in ethnolinguistics. He recalls and discusses three people, who were especially prominent in promoting this work, namely William Cameron Townsend, Kenneth Pike, and Eugene A. Nida.²

Northern India is the area for the decades long (1915–1981) activity of the Presbyterian missionaries William and Charlotte Wiser. Susan Snow Wadley gives their story in “William and Charlotte Vaill Wiser. Missionaries as Scholars and Development Officers” (86–101). “Their influence,” she writes, “on anthropology in particular and Indian scholarship more generally have been vitally important to the development of Western (and Indian) understandings of caste and village social life” (87). As missionaries already engaged in “development assistance” in rural areas of north India, they quickly saw how important it was to get a

thorough knowledge of local culture. Out of this conviction grew many publications, some of them describing the “*jajmani* system” (patron-client relationship). This information soon found its way into the classroom and anthropology textbooks in the USA.

Mission and anthropology in Papua New Guinea are the themes for the last four papers in the book. Nancy Lutkehaus (“The Society of the Divine Word Missionaries: Late 19th and 20th Century Ethnographers along the Northeast Coast of New Guinea”; 102–114) pulls together and evaluates the contribution which the SVD missionaries have made over the past hundred years to anthropology and linguistics as well as the contribution they continue to make to the present time. The centerpiece of the article is Georg Höltker (1895–1976), a trained anthropologist (studied in Berlin, Ph.D. in Vienna 1930), member of the editorial staff of the *Anthropos* (chief editor 1932–1935), Assistant and Full Professor in Mödling close to Vienna, Fribourg, Sankt Augustin. From 1936 to 1939 he did anthropological research in New Guinea. His close cooperation with missionaries working in New Guinea led to numerous anthropological publications, which, in turn, made the rich knowledge of many missionaries of the local cultures and languages available to academia (cf. Höltker 1975).

In his article “Culture and Faith. The Contribution of the Melanesian Institute, Papua New Guinea” (116–136), Philip Gibbs describes the “Melanesian Institute” in Goroka, which was established in 1969 by three Catholic missionary congregations (SVD, MSC, SM) as “The Melanesian Social Pastoral Institute” (Brandewie 1970). The stimulus for this came from Ernest Brandewie, at the time an SVD, who spent many months doing fieldwork in the Central Highlands of New Guinea. In 1966 he received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago for his work on the kinship system of the Mbowamb. The Institute soon opened its doors to other Christian denominations (for example, the Anglicans, Lutherans, United Church) and took on an ecumenical character. According to Gibbs, an important goal of the institute was, and still is, to develop an “applied anthropology” for the development of mission work. The publications of the institute (*Catalyst*, Point series, Occasional Papers) are an excellent outlet for the anthropologists working in the Institute.

Stimulated by her experience during her many field research trips to the Chimbu region in the Highlands of PNG ever since 1958, Paula Brown, Professor Emerita of Anthropology at SUNY, Stony Brook, describes the involvement of some

² For more on Nida, cf. Shaw 2007.

SVD missionaries with anthropology (“Mission Ethnographic and Linguistic Studies of the Chimbu”; 138–150). She goes into some detail with Alfons Schäfer (1904–1958) and John Nilles (1905–1993). As the basis of this involvement she cites Alfons Schäfer, who had written shortly after he arrived in New Guinea in 1930: “Other missionaries and I ... agreed that to be good missionaries we also had to be good ethnologists” (Schäfer 1991: 129). That this thinking in the meantime has become ordinary common sense is confirmed by the way Eugene Nida opens his book “Customs and Cultures” in 1954: “Good missionaries have always been good ‘anthropologists’” (Nida 1954: xi).

The final article in the book comes from Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart, both of them anthropologists. It is titled: “Ethnographic Records from the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Missionary-Linguists, Missionary-Ethnographers” (151–160). They deal with the notable contributions of the two evangelical Lutheran missionaries Georg F. Vicedom and Hermann Strauss of the Neuendettelsau Lutheran Mission. The entire article is a plea not to play missionaries and anthropologists off against one another, but rather to put together their ethnographic and linguistic work and then evaluate it properly. In effect, this is exactly what this entire brief book now under review attempts to do.

Unfortunately, this publication in some areas leaves much to be desired. The unbalanced choice of topics, which the editor himself laments, has already been mentioned. More careful editing, typesetting, and proofreading would surely have caught some disturbing formal mistakes. For example, with the (re)formatting of the text many forced, wrongly split words remain. Much worse is the incompleteness of the “Bibliography” (161–181). Some omitted titles can be mentioned here, some of which are mentioned in the text: Ahrens 2002; Alter 1975, 1976 (?); Anderson 1994; Angrosino 1994; Böhm 1983; Caldwell 1991; Fenton 1974; Fischer 1919; Fugmann 1984; Hagard 1885; Haile 1926, 1954; Morgan 1877; Roberts 1996; Stanley 1887. More care could also have gone into the alphabetical order of the authors. Unfortunately, an index is missing.

Finally, some inaccuracies were also disturbing, which a careful check or editing would have caught. For example, in the article by N. Lutkehaus: the departure of the first SVD missionaries from Steyl to China was in 1879, not in 1882 (104). Wilhelm Schmidt’s opus magnum “Ursprung der Gottesidee” (“Origin of the Idea of God”) did not appear in 1926, but in a total of 12 volumes from 1912

to 1955. What did appear in 1926 was the second edition of the first volume (105, 177). The citation referring to Arnold Janssen (106) is not taken from Fisher 1911; it comes from the big biography of Janssen by Hermann Fischer (1919: 240). G. Hölter never went to the Philippines as a missionary. To be sure, he was appointed to the Philippines, but never went there. In the same year his appointment was changed to work on the *Anthropos* (107; cf. Saake 1975: 11). Karl Böhm came to St. Augustin in 1974 to prepare his book “Das Leben einiger Inselvölker Neuguineas” for publication; Hölter died in 1976, and the final preparation of the manuscript was then taken over by the *Anthropos* editorial staff (110; cf. Böhm 1975: 5, 15). The *Anthropos* Institute and the nearby Haus Völker und Kulturen (Museum of Peoples and Cultures) are, of course, situated in Sankt Augustin, not in Bad Driburg, which is more than 200 kilometers away (103).

II

This book “Anthropology’s Debt to Missionaries” is definitely necessary and deserving. But in spite of the fact that this theme has already been addressed,³ many colleagues have failed to acknowledge this debt and continue to hold on to their bias with respect to missionaries. Even the many publications of the last decades related to this relationship have apparently done little to change anything. For the sake of completeness, the most important of these publications can be mentioned here once more: “Missions and Anthropology. A Love/Hate Relationship” (Hiebert 1978); “Mutual Biases of Anthropologists and Missionaries” (Hughes 1978); “Anthropologists versus Missionaries. The Influence of Presuppositions” (Stipe 1980); “Missionaries, Anthropologists, and Cultural Change” (Whiteman 1983); “Anthropologists and Missionaries” (Salamone 1983); “The Ambivalent Relationship between Mission and Anthropology. Criticisms and Suggestions (Quack 1986); “The Ambiguity of Rapprochement” (Bonsen et al. 1990); “Anthropologists and Missionaries. Brothers under the Skin” (Van der Geest 1990); “Anthropologists and Missionaries. Some Case Studies” (Pickering 1992); “‘More Pastoral than Academic ...’ Practice and Purpose of Missionary Ethnographic Research (West New Guinea, 1950–1962)” (Jaarsma 1993).

3 Cf. Nida 1954, Luzbetak 1963 and 1988.

At this point I would like to inject myself into this discussion about “missionaries/anthropologists” and try to advance the conversation a little. I will do this following the maxim of Schäfer and Nida which has already been quoted: “Good missionaries have always been good anthropologists.” For this purpose I would propose two theses, the first looking at the issue from the side of the missionary as anthropologist, testing the statement whether the missionary can be as qualified an ethnographer and anthropologist as anybody else. The second thesis looks more closely at the dictum that to be a (good) missionary, he must also be an anthropologist.⁴

1. Whether the notion of the link between Christian mission and anthropology fits some anthropologists and missionaries or not, at least now anthropology and mission are closely related to each other by their respective history. Long before anthropology established itself as a science in the middle of the 19th century, it was primarily Christian missionaries who had already distinguished themselves as ethnographers and anthropologists as these terms are understood today. In this connection we cannot forget people like Wilhelm von Rubruk, OFM (ca. 1215–1270; Fleming, 1252–1255 at the court of the Khan in Mongolia), Bartolomé de Las Casas, OP (1474–1566), Bernardino de Sahagún, OFM (1500–1590), Jean de Lery (1534–1613; a French Calvinist missionary in Brazil from 1556–1558), and Joseph François Lafitau, SJ (1681–1746), who, according to Wilhelm Mühlmann (1968: 44f.), became the founder of modern comparative ethnography. In the 19th century, as modern anthropology developed, Christian missionaries were scarcely involved, because the evolutionary emphasis of anthropology in those years were generally foreign to Christian thinking. That would soon change.

By the beginning of the last century at the latest, Christian missionaries once more emerged as first-rate ethnographers and even influenced anthropology by their ethnographic publications. The *Anthropos* journal, which was founded by Fr. Wilhelm Schmidt SVD in 1906, played a key role in this process. Several essays in the book under review (“Anthropology’s Debt to Missionaries”) have pointed this out already. A great number of profound contributions to anthropology and linguistics by missionaries can be found in the *Anthropos*. The list of Christian missionaries, who became “professional” anthropologists and linguists in the later

years of their life and brought their experiences as missionaries into the discipline is long, which the index of “100 Years of *Anthropos*” clearly shows (cf. *Anthropos* 2006).

Ethnocentrism is a universal phenomenon, an obstacle which creates a problem for anybody who wants to understand people of a strange culture, whether it is a missionary or an anthropologist in a typical fieldwork situation. That is why missionary-anthropologists have always and rightly guarded themselves from being written off (as anthropologists) just because they profess to being Christians. Dominik Schröder (SVD, missionary in China, anthropologist) addresses this issue in the following way: “The author considers himself to be a believing, religious person. He is aware that different ways of thinking can precipitate prejudices and cause distortions in the objective value of one’s observations and interpretations. Without addressing the question whether a totally supposition free science is even possible, he believes that a person of religious experience and convictions will have easier access to and an understanding of a different, strange religion than the one who has no experience of religion at all. However, he must also be aware that he must be doubly careful and constantly check himself lest he read into and make interpretations of his material which are not upheld by the facts. Otherwise he might force things in order to bring them into line with his own convictions and preconceptions, which really have nothing to do with these” (Schröder und Quack 1979: 15). Just as every anthropologist, so every missionary also, who will face the threat of ethnocentrism, must be very aware and clear about his own position, if he wishes to write useful ethnographies. D. Schröder, in any case, tried his best to define his own position and to keep in mind how this would affect his fieldwork. One must also test and measure the quality of the results of missionary-anthropologists. In any case, they deserve a fair and objective assessment like any anthropologist, and many of them would hold up very well under scrutiny.

2. The thesis that missionaries can be good anthropologists is relatively easy to substantiate. By contrast, the thesis that one can only be a good missionary if one is also a good anthropologist, formulated in this way, might meet with resistance. This thesis, therefore, deserves more elaboration. Inculturation is one of the main objectives of mission. Mission leads to inculturation. It is absolutely necessary that the missionary, who preaches the gospel and proclaims the Good News, must make his message accessible to his listeners. To do this, he must take his audience seriously and must try to

4 Cf. Quack 1986, 1994, 1995.

appreciate them in their cultural setting, if he hopes to reach them and speak to them in a way that they will understand (cf. Quack 1986: 230). Mission is largely an intercultural encounter and presupposes a practical anthropology, which offers the basic attitude which should characterize anybody who seeks to understand a strange culture. This attitude, then, should characterize missionaries in their efforts to communicate with people of another culture.

Missionary life and work in a cross-cultural context is precisely an experiment in inculturation. This requires of all those so engaged that they clearly keep separate that which is truly Christian from its cultural expression (often taken from the culture of the missionary). This is not easy; indeed, it is well-nigh impossible if those engaged in cross-cultural work do not become aware of their own cultural rooting and setting and keep this clearly in mind. The critique of the gospel offered to the particular way of life of a people affects people of every culture. The inculturation of the Gospel can also, then, be understood as the process of holding up and measuring the culture according to the standards of the Gospel with the purpose of setting all people free to be truly human. There is no culture which is once and for all Christian, which does not need to be constantly re-evaluated according to the standards of the Gospel. Inculturation must be ongoing, everywhere and always. As a result, no one culture can claim to be the one valid standard for what must be preached as Christian life, indeed, the only one that defines what is truly human. Anthropology, the science that studies people of different cultures, the science of culture par excellence, offers essential insights and assistance to all those who are engaged in mission and in the effort to "inculturate" the Gospel.

The thesis that one can only be a good missionary if one is also an anthropologist – correct as it is – can be and is misunderstood by many missionaries. Of course, by this it is not meant that every missionary must be a professionally trained anthropologist. What is meant, however, is that anyone who deals with people of different cultures – and that is very often the situation of a missionary – should very definitely be concerned to develop a basic and sincere interest in the way of life and thinking of the other. This is an insight which Alexandre Le Roy formulated over a 100 years ago in the very first essay in the first issue of the new *Anthropos* journal: "The Catholic missionary can also be a missionary of science. He can be and, in a real sense, must be. The missionary ... has to develop a work strategy which, above all else, includes the study and knowledge of the country and its inhabitants,

the local customs, laws, religions, languages, etc. This study is part of realizing his task: the better the missionary gets to know the milieu in which he works, the less danger there is that he will make mistakes, while the chances grow that his hard work will be successful."⁵

III

As the contributions of N. Lutkehaus, P. Gibbs, and P. Brown show in "Anthropology's Debt to Missionaries," the anthropological engagement of the SVD missionaries over many years in Papua New Guinea was outstanding and exceptional. Equally outstanding and intensive was the anthropological interest of the SVD missionaries working in Qinghai in Northwest China. This was true especially of the time lasting from the middle to the end of the 1940s. In the final part of this review essay, I would like to tell the reader about this very remarkable chapter related to the theme of missionary-anthropologist and arrive at a proper evaluation of what went on in this mission.

The Qinghai⁶ mission was staffed by just barely 18 missionaries. Of these, two, D. Schröder and M. Hermanns⁷ were set completely free to pursue anthropological research. The Qinghai missionaries began to publish a kind of German newspaper or circular devoted to an exchange of ideas to which every missionary was invited to contribute. It was called "On the Blue Lake."⁸ This newsletter was really one of a kind: it was written by the missionaries of Qinghai only and no copy was allowed to leave Qinghai. Every missionary could write how and what he wanted; there was no censorship. It also provided a forum for discussion, where every missionary could present an account of his experiences, reflections, and ideas and share them with his colleagues. Over the course of the time this newsletter was in operation, practically every missionary had contributed to it. Between 1942 and the takeover by the Red Army in 1949, there appeared some 32 issues comprising over 2000 pages. As the Communists were approaching, all of the copies ready to hand were burned; none survived. The only thing that did survive was a list of titles of the longer contributions. These titles suggest that they

5 Le Roy 1906: 4; cf. Gächter 2005: 194f.

6 Other ways of writing this, e.g.: Ch'inghai, Ts'inghai, Tsinghai.

7 M. Hermanns left China 1947 for Europe; cf. Schröder 1972.

8 The full title was: "The Cross of Christ on the Blue Lake" named after the huge lake "Qinghai" / "Koko Nor," which gives the name to the province of Qinghai.

dealt mostly with pastoral matters, but were generally related closely to ethnographic observations. According to this list, between 1948 and 1949 Johann Frick had written the following ethnographic essays for this circular: “The Wages of Field Workers in the Western Valley of Xining,” “Smallpox Inoculation among the Qinghai Chinese,” “Superstitious Beliefs in the Western Valley of Xining,” “Magic Remedies Used on Sick Children,” “Betrothal Customs in the Western Valley,” “Chinese Fables,” “Punishment for Infidelity in the Prayer of the Pagans in Qinghai.”⁹ Frick returned to many of the themes handled here in later publications.¹⁰

Another project of the Qinghai missionaries was as remarkable as the earlier “On the Blue Lake.” This was the publication of a book dealing with the ethnography of Qinghai on the occasion of the 75th jubilee of the SVD (1950). The title of this book was simply “Ethnographic Contributions from the Qinghai Province (China).”¹¹ The idea for this type of book surfaced sometime in 1948 and was immediately put into effect. Johann Frick and Franz Eichinger took over the task of organizing and editing the book. Six other missionaries contributed articles, which had to be read, improved, sometimes totally rewritten – a tiresome, tedious task which consumed many long nights. The two editors themselves contributed more than half of the text (189 out of 354 pages). J. Frick wrote “Wedding Customs of Hei-tsuei-tzu in the Province of Qinghai” and “Wage Conditions of Women Farm Workers in Qinghai.” F. Eichinger is the author of “Hide Preparation among the Tent Dwelling Herdsmen of the Chiamri” and of “Measures to Combat Childlessness in Folk Medicine.” The two together, F. Eichinger and J. Frick, wrote: “Animals in the Life of the People.” The rest of the contributions and their authors are: “Family Justice in the House of Mourning” (Johannes Ternay), “The Emperor in the Thinking of the Ordinary People” (Josef Kube), “The Dog Headed Demon in the Popular Belief of the Western Valley and of the Contact Region of China and Tibet in the Eastern Valley of Kuei-te in the Province of Qinghai” (Alois Oberle), “National Characteristics of the Muslims of Qinghai” (Paul Cwik), “The ‘shao nien’ Songs in Qinghai” (Josef Trippner), and “Some Wedding Songs of the Tujen” (Dominik Schröder).¹²

Although the editorial work was finished by the middle of 1949 and the manuscripts sent off to the editorial office of “Folklore Studies” in Tokyo, the book appeared not until 1952. It caused quite a stir, for it was unique as the common effort of missionaries all from one area; in addition it proved to be a piece of outstanding ethnography (Frick und Eichinger 1952). After their involuntary deportation from the Qinghai mission, two of the Qinghai missionaries made anthropology the center of their later activity. D. Schröder studied in Fribourg and Frankfurt, where he received his Ph.D. in 1951 and then worked on the *Anthropos* journal; later he taught as professor at St. Augustine’s (Germany) and Nagoya (Japan). From Japan he did fieldwork among the Puyuma on Taiwan (Burgmann 1975). After his return from China in 1952, J. Frick studied at the University of Vienna where he received his doctorate in 1955. Until a ripe old age he worked with the Anthropos Institute. Much of his anthropological work, based on the data he had collected earlier, was published during these years (cf. Frick 1995; Quack 2003). One of the last fruits of these missionary-anthropologists to be published was the essay “The Career of the Gurtum Lama” (Der Werdegang des lamaistischen Gurtum) which F. Eichinger and J. Frick wrote, using the unpublished works of their colleague D. Schröder (Eichinger et al. 1988).

As an unbiased look into the history of mission work on the one hand and at the history of anthropology on the other shows, it becomes clear, based on these examples, that the close relationship between anthropology and mission is no accident; the importance of this relationship must not be minimized. For missionaries this holds with no reservations. On the other hand, many an anthropologist has, at the least, enjoyed and appreciated the hospitality of missionaries in the area where they have done fieldwork; in addition, they have often drawn upon the unmined, rich ethnographic knowledge of many missionaries.

I thank my friends and colleagues Othmar Gächter and Ernest Brandewie for their selfless support: Gächter for critically reading this review essay and for many stimulating discussions, Brandewie for the translation of this essay into English. Whatever help and encouragement I have received, I take, of course, full blame for all faults the work may have.

9 The titles given here are originally written in German.

10 E.g., “Magic Remedies Used on Sick Children in the Western Valley of Sining” (Frick 1951); cf. Quack 1994: 11 ff.

11 “Ethnographische Beiträge aus der Ch’inghai Provinz (China).”

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