

NEWS & OPINIONS

Response to Timothy Larsen's "British Social Anthropologists and Missionaries in the Twentieth Century"

Lindy Backues

In this timely article, Timothy Larsen does a fine job of helping set the record straight concerning the historical animosity long evident between cultural anthropologists and Christian missionaries (Larsen focuses on the British context—though I believe a similar division also obtains between academic anthropologists and Christian missionaries in the US.) Larsen points to the standard explanation put forward by those in anthropology as they seek to explain this rift: anthropologists understandably dislike Christian missionaries simply because of the latter's long-standing alignment with cultural imperialism. Such a position carries with it such *prima facie* explanatory power that it might seem a fool's errand to even question it.

But question it Larsen does! Because of their long-term involvement in local cultures and their impressive linguistic skills and cultural understanding, Christian missionaries were significant sources and guides for early pioneers of social anthropology. Missionaries acted almost as docents for anthropologists, especially before fieldwork became a common practice (during the early days of armchair theorizing). As Larsen illustrates, this reliance on missionary knowledge was essential for early anthropologists as they developed insights and tools for deep cultural and contextual understanding. Larsen's discovery seems odd given the already-mentioned standard explanation for the division between these two groups. In a word, if early anthropologists had genuinely found missionary practices and presence so repugnant (due to the inherent cultural imperialism embedded in the missionary task), why would they have (at least privately) relied so heavily on missionary assistance and cooperation as they developed their field into a

bona fide academic discipline? Such a conundrum prompts Larsen to seek an alternative explanation for the divide.

Based on substantial textual and historical evidence, his explanation is this: Christian missionaries have come to represent a challenge to the exclusive expertise that cultural anthropologists have increasingly claimed for themselves, particularly as the latter have sought to establish their academic and professional credentials and their authority within the academy. This growing rivalry has caused anthropologists to dismiss missionaries outright, often engaging in what have been essentially *ad hominem* critiques. Missionaries' insights have been deemed suspect simply because they have come from missionaries, and this has relegated them to the status of biased amateurs. Ironically, the missionaries who have continued to be cited or respected by anthropologists are mostly those who have willingly acknowledged they are "not an anthropologist." Thus, respect can obtain provided proper missionary obsequiousness has been in place.

All of this represents a powerful and, in my view, accurate critique of how the relationship between missionaries and anthropologists has evolved over time. Occupational rivalry certainly provides a plausible, and generally overlooked, explanation for much of the distaste many anthropologists have shown toward missionaries over the past 100 years or so—the evidence Larsen presents in this piece is simply impossible to ignore. However, I believe the situation might be too complex to be reduced to a single explanatory variable alone. Therefore, I would like to suggest two additional factors that might be considered

alongside the presence of professional rivalry that Larsen so astutely identifies.

Firstly, we should not too easily dismiss the accusation long leveled by anthropologists against Christian missionaries: the fact is, cultural imperialism *has been* closely intertwined with much of historic Christian missionary efforts, with civilization, commerce, and Christianization serving as the three pillars of Western imperialism. This pervasive and problematic fusion has often gone unchallenged over the years and globally it persists—even today—in much of what is promoted as Christianity. I believe this to be deeply problematic from a theological standpoint, but evaluating it theologically is *not* the duty of cultural anthropologists, nor can we fault them for understandably registering grave misgivings about it as they have encountered it in its various forms worldwide. A wise response to such a critique would be to emphasize theological housecleaning, adopting a stance of communal self-critique that aligns more closely with the marginalized, with the oppressed, and with the silenced, a liberative posture more in keeping with the gospel and with the standpoint of the biblical Jesus himself. Ironically, such a stance will probably even end up challenging Western anthropology itself.

What leads me to this last statement is the peculiar fact that anthropologists can only validly accuse missionaries of being imperialistic (often a valid critique, as I have just admitted) to the extent they themselves have been exempt from colonialist behavior. However, given the work of thinkers like Hans-Georg Gadamer, Alasdair MacIntyre, Zygmunt Bauman, or Charles Taylor (there are many others), things have shifted a good deal over the last several decades. In this new “post-modern” context, what Taylor calls “exclusive humanism” can no longer be considered value-free or devoid of its own imperialist tendencies (Taylor 2007). For Taylor, the stance of “exclusive humanism” is one that only allows for sources of meaning that derive from within human life; it refuses to acknowledge any reality beyond or outside of it. Yet, we know that much of the globe’s population embraces a position quite in opposition to “exclusive humanism;” much of the globe’s inhabitants are nurtured by a cosmology that acknowledges and deeply incorporates transcendent sources of meaning and reality. These sorts of perspectives embrace the idea that there are realities and values beyond mere human existence, ones often rooted and anchored in religious or spiritual beliefs. Taylor argues that such a stance offers space for deeper, more profound sources

of meaning that extend beyond the confines of human life and experience. As I have noted in a previous article in this very journal (Backues 2023, 13), if we fail to take seriously the religious underpinnings of these people’s cosmologies, we risk imposing yet another form of imperialism on them—this time, by way of a disenchanting regnancy deeply rooted in a dominant secularism that (sometimes secretly, sometimes openly) disdains persons who hold to worldviews funded by transcendent values. In short, many anthropologists need to address their own conceptual housecleaning regarding imperialism. This critique, it seems to me, lies directly at the surface of much that Larsen puts his finger on.

Secondly, we must acknowledge that what Larsen points to as increased disdain for missionaries among anthropologists over the last three or four decades should not surprise us, given what Thomas Kuhn taught us long ago about “paradigm shifts” (this is now a famous and surely an overused aphorism). Kuhn described the social process of epistemological conversions, where new experts rise to replace old ones, driven by a crisis in the old paradigm and a consequent yet necessarily different way of seeing things, by way of a new pre-analytical model that was previously unrecognized or not permitted. The paradigm shift process is long, arduous, agonistic, and contentious, often extending over a generation or more as it comes to fruition; and it rarely, if ever, happens peacefully. Old experts—who gate-keep by way of the expertise they command, the terminology they control, and the methodologies they steward (tied to the old paradigms they owed their positions to)—do not easily surrender their authority nor do they tolerate dissent within their orthodoxy. As Kuhn’s famous book title suggests, the result is more akin to a “revolution” than an academic exploration (Kuhn 2012).

What we have here is something that involves much more than mere professional rivalry; this sort of shift involves competition between deeply rooted conceptual and epistemological perspectives, and each group ends up viewing the other with deep suspicion. Since what we are examining is a paradigm shift, there arises a clash of cultures, a contest of worldviews, and there is much speaking past each other, especially in terms of questions asked—not merely answers or solutions proffered.

I must be clear: though missionaries have historically existed longer than anthropologists, the latter have long enjoyed the dominant position in the academy. With the advent of increasingly deeper

fieldwork methodologies taken up by anthropologists (as Larsen pointed out), and with growing dominance of post-modern, reflexive, autoethnographic perspectives, the religious predilections of tradition-based populations have become very difficult for ethnographers to ignore. So, to conduct truly epistemologically humble fieldwork, anthropologists have been increasingly forced to open their discipline to what could be called "inclusive humanism," a necessarily inclusive and accepting approach to the religious other, those with base worldviews different from the ethnographer, and the only consonant stance is for the anthropologist to not expect these new-found religious friends necessarily to convert to the deep grammar perspective of the secularized visitor.

And, as I stated earlier, while such a stance does challenge the variety of imperial Christianity that has historically aligned itself with centers of political power, it also challenges the committed secular individual, the person who has a priori aligned with modernist doctrines of science, academic dogma, and other "secular" narratives of power that bid others toward a type of conversion. I believe that, should missionaries (or transcendentally oriented anthropologists) adopt forms of cultural exploration that mirror the kenotic, non-control style of the Crucified One—a style that serves but does not dictate nor demand compliance—such an approach will confront both old-line missionaries and secular anthropologists with a starkly new paradigm, one that does not require compliance (I have previously explored precisely this topic elsewhere. See Backues, 2017).

As Kuhn taught us, such a change is sure not to unfold before us in a manner that is peaceful, linear and cumulative with what came before it, nor in a manner that brings tranquility in its wake. Instead, it will feel more like a revolution. In respect to any sort of paradigm shift, old ways of thinking simply do not go down easily, nor do new paradigms generally emerge to applause nor welcome.

References

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