

NEWS & OPINIONS

Response to Timothy Larsen, “British Social Anthropologists and Missionaries in the Twentieth Century”

Brian Howell

I began my entry into the tribe of anthropology about a decade after the seminal publication that kicks off Larsen’s historical account here. Graduating from my undergraduate program in 1991, I spent a couple years outside of academia before finding my way back via the School of World Mission (later the School of Intercultural Studies and finally combined into the School of Mission and Theology) at Fuller Seminary in 1995. At that time, I knew I was interested in processes of cultural/social change around Christian conversion, but I wasn’t quite sure which discipline would best allow for the sorts of questions I wanted to ask. I briefly flirted with political science and sociology, but at Fuller found anthropology, represented by two dedicated faculty members in the discipline, Dan Shaw and Charles Kraft, as well as the legacy of the recently departed Paul Hiebert (who moved to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School a few years earlier). Several other influential faculty members (and faculty emeriti) such as Charles Van Engen, Arthur Glasser, and Dudley Woodbury, while not anthropologists per se, affirmed the centrality of ethnographic approaches to religious life, and the vital role of understanding cultural context for theological work. Thus, it was not difficult for me to see that anthropology was a discipline that allowed for the holistic questions I hoped to address and held a central position in the missiology of the evangelical church.

It was only a bit later, when I left Fuller and started my graduate studies at Washington University in St. Louis, that I was introduced to the notion that anthropologists didn’t particularly respect orthodox Christians—aka, the ‘repugnant cultural other.’ Wash U was a friendly place, with senior scholar Bob Canfield, a strong Christian faculty member who sat on

my committee, but the wider discipline was still a place where Christian commitment was often considered at odds with anthropological rigor.

Starting in 1994, when I first attended the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, I heard stories from professionally accomplished Christian anthropologists, such as Tom Headland (SIL), Dean Arnold (Wheaton College), and Darrell Whiteman (Asbury) about the animosity they had experienced as Christians in the field of anthropology. Headland and Whiteman, in particular, who had co-founded a group meeting at the AAA each year, had several stories of snide comments or open mockery from their colleagues in anthropology. Bob Priest, who had attended graduate programs at the University of Chicago and Berkeley (two of the top anthropology programs in the United States), had even written his MA thesis on the conflict between anthropologists and missionaries, and had found his Christian background something of a conundrum (at best) among the faculty at Chicago.

At the same time, I was getting to know a generation of scholars in my cohort—such as Jenell Paris, James Huff, Vince Gil, and Diane King—and it seemed clear that we were having a different experience. It wasn’t that we couldn’t see some of the animosity (or, more typically, incredulity) of our secular peers toward avowed Christians working in the discipline, but the ideological opposition seemed to be of a different time. As a Christian working specifically in the anthropology of Christianity, I often found myself in settings in which Christians of many stripes were the topic of conversation, and with a few exceptions, the general attitude of my secular colleagues was one of curiosity that an avowed Christian such as me would

be working in a non-mission-related approach to Christianity as an anthropological object. Prominent, or soon-to-be prominent scholars such as Joel Robbins, Simon Coleman, Omri Elisha, Jon Bialecki, and Fenella Cannell were nothing but gracious and engaged with me and my work.

This is not to refute any of the history Larsen lays bare, nor the experiences of my more senior colleagues. It was in 1991 that Susan Harding published the widely-cited “Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other,” in which she enjoined anthropologists to put away their cultural biases against conservative Christianity as a topic of research, presaging the shift that I was perceiving in the 1990s (Harding 1991). But in that article, she went to some pains to make it clear that a) she perceived there to be a widespread bias against conservative Christians as worthy subjects of anthropological inquiry and b) she herself was not at all affiliated with the religion even as she urged her colleagues to be less closed-minded. In other words, she affirmed that conservative U.S./Western Christianity, and Christians, remained suspect both in terms of how anthropologists might engage them “out there,” as well as a concern that they might, in fact, be “in here.”

A decade later, in 2003, as Joel Robbins was making his apologia for the development of an anthropology of Christianity, he too noted the persistent bias against taking Christianity seriously as an anthropological object among many in the discipline (Robbins 2003, 191). At the same time, the very appearance of his piece was a clear signal that these biases were waning, and resistance to the study of Christianity was flagging. His essay appeared in a special issue of the journal *Religion* in which a collection of anthropologists, including me, were invited to contribute pieces on the anthropology of Christianity with the expressed purpose of overcoming some of the social and cultural biases of the academy towards such topics. A few years later, Robbins’ monograph, about Christianity among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea (2004), and Fenella Cannell’s edited volume entitled simply *The Anthropology of Christianity* (2006, published by Duke University Press) took the conversation about Christianity even further.

By the end of the aughts, the anthropology of Christianity was well established, and anthropologists with an expressed Christian faith were very much in the mix. A generation of Christian scholars behind me (such as Naomi Haynes, Leanne Williams Greene,

and Joseph Webster) were making their mark in the discipline. It seemed clear that the hostility, and even suspicion, of Christians in anthropology had waned significantly, if not disappeared altogether. This is not to say that Christian *missionization* was celebrated in the anthropological academy, as sensitivity to inequalities of power, neo-colonialism, proselytization, patriarchy, and indigenous people’s rights and autonomy were all becoming more central to anthropology’s ethics. And while missionization is not simply part and parcel of these phenomena, the history of missionary entanglement and the non-Christian perspective on missionary activity would certainly pique anthropological concerns. At the same time, the ideological opposition to Christian belief (and religious belief generally) as held by anthropologists ourselves and the idea that religious conviction was antithetical to anthropological work, had shifted dramatically.

But there was another change occurring through this period as well. While it seemed that anthropologists were coming to accept the religious convictions of Muslims, Christians, Jews, and others in their midst, and largely dropped their own convictions of conducting an “unbiased” and naturalistic science, the *Christian* academy seemed to be turning against (or at least away from) their engagement with anthropology.

Robert Priest, in his presidential address to the American Society of Missiology in 2014, noted how many seminaries that previously had robust anthropology programs, such as Trinity, Fuller, and Asbury, were not replacing these scholars as they left or retired (Priest 2015). He noted both the long-standing distrust of social science among Christians, as well as the increasing willingness of contemporary missiological and theological leadership to dismiss social science as a valid way of knowing.

Priest has not, nor has anyone else to my knowledge, tried to parse out why this turn may be occurring. I cannot present a definitive argument, but I do think Larsen’s account of the resistance to missionaries among anthropologists can provide some places to start.

Ideologically, Larsen notes that anthropologists held long-standing antipathy to the missionary applications of cultural knowledge, specifically religious change. He notes that in the early 20th century, anthropologists such as Malinowski and W.H.R. Rivers dismissed missionary ethnography as “biased” and “amateur.” As Priest noted in his presidential address, by 2015, this rejection seems to have turned

around to see the missiologists now voicing similar concerns about the anthropologists. For example, in his widely celebrated book *Understanding Christian Mission* (*Christianity Today* book award recipient and American Missiological Society Book of the Year), former dean of Fuller's School of Intercultural Studies (and current president of Gordon-Conwell Seminary) Scott Sunquist proclaimed that a central thesis of his book was that missiology should not be "taken captive" by social sciences (2017). It was, in fact, while he was dean at Fuller that the school failed to hire an anthropologist to replace the lone-remaining anthropologist on his retirement (R. Daniel Shaw). The only faculty member now at Fuller with the title of "professor of anthropology" self describes as a "practical theologian working at the intersection of social science and theology."¹ Trinity Evangelical Divinity School fared somewhat better, as they have an anthropologist trained at the University of Heidelberg who has strong research interests in cultural anthropology. But he is a lone scholar in the discipline at a program that formerly had two anthropologists trained at top anthropology programs. Asbury, too, is losing their anthropologists to retirement, and appears to either not be replacing them, or replacing them with scholars who are not trained in anthropology. It's a leap to impute common motivations in all these institutions, but it's not hard to suspect that secularly trained anthropologists may be viewed with some of the suspicion cast generally on social science, and thus have some ideological opposition.

At the same time, Larsen notes an institutional aspect to the rejection of missionaries and Christians, in which anthropologists viewed missionaries as potential rivals, and largely kept their contributions out of their institutions. The exception, Larsen notes, proves the rule, as the one missionary to have substantial institutional presence, Edwin Smith, also made "careful, lifelong efforts to reassure anthropologists that he was in no sense a professional rival" (2024, 8).

I would not argue that the missionary rejection of anthropology is quite analogous, as academic institutional life and disciplinary professional societies have profoundly changed in the decades since the anthropological community formed its disciplinary institutions in the 19th century. But there is an institutional dynamic that has contributed to the loss of anthropological influence in missiological spaces.

Specifically, in the mid-1900s, Christian institutions began developing their own PhD granting programs, with one of the more popular ones being the PhD in "Intercultural Studies." This became, by the 1990s, a standard academic preparation for academic missiologists, and was often tailored to suit career missionaries who were seeking higher education (with early examples of distance learning, cohort-based programs, and other institutional innovations meant to meet the needs of diasporic student populations). These programs initially had strong representation of anthropologists on the faculty, but as those faculty retired, they were often replaced by the PhD in Intercultural Studies from other Christian institutions. Many of these scholars produced strong research and some leaned strongly into anthropology as their disciplinary foundation. (See, for example, Aminta Arrington at John Brown University, or Chris Flanders at Abilene Christian University.) But as anthropologists and other social scientists at Christian institutions retire or depart, they are frequently replaced by graduates of the PhD programs in Intercultural Studies or even biblical studies with a kind of social science emphasis. For example, Asbury Seminary, which once had four anthropologists and at least one sociologist, all with training from leading U.S. universities, will soon have no faculty whose PhD does not come from either Fuller or Asbury. This is not to suggest that these may not be excellent scholars, but interdisciplinary programs in intercultural studies do not produce the kind of deep engagement with the discipline of anthropology specifically that programs in that field can. Institutionally, Christian schools are turning toward protecting their own systems in a manner not unlike the anthropological community of 100 years ago.

We can be grateful for Dr. Larsen's account of the class of missionaries and anthropologists in the 20th century, as it can shed light on our current moment. History is a powerful mirror for understanding dynamics in the present, and this seems to be true again. Just as anthropologists turned ideologically and institutionally against missions in the mid-19th century and early 20th century, so missiology appears to be excluding anthropology from its ranks at the beginning of the 21st century. We can only hope that just as anthropologists have recovered and found their way into a stronger relationship with Christians and missionaries, so too will our missiological communities

¹ "Johnny Ramirez-Johnson | Fuller Seminary," January 9, 2018, <https://www.fuller.edu/faculty/johnny-ramirez-johnson/>.

come back to their fruitful connections to the anthropological world.

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