

## NEWS & OPINIONS

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# Pressures, Practicalities, and the Presence of God: A Response to Timothy Larsen's "British Social Anthropologists and Missionaries in the Twentieth Century"

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Humans crave meaning; we use language to discover, invent, reflect upon, share, and negotiate meanings with one another. Some Christian anthropologists even pinpoint language as a key indicator of the *imago Dei* in *Homo sapiens*. Humans tell stories to one another in all available modalities—verbal, visual, digital, and print—making and sharing meanings of events, relationships, and encounters ranging from the quotidian to the eternal.

In "British Social Anthropologists and Missionaries in the Twentieth Century," historian Timothy Larsen offers an interpretive frame for the history of anthropology, one that raises opportunity to reflect on the stories we tell about the professionalization of anthropology and the presence of Christians in the field. His essay reads like a mystery: things are often not what they seem. Larsen interrupts the story as commonly told, interrogating the historical accuracy of the reasons given for antipathy between anthropologists and missionaries. He shows how the stories we tell are shaped by broader pressures including university resources, funding structures, political agendas, and global forces such as colonialism and globalization. Pressures intensify when they intersect with career trajectories, job security, and stigma and prestige.

Larsen unravels a taken-for-granted story, that anthropologists have antipathy toward missionaries because missionaries engage in cultural imperialism. Larsen shows that anthropologists, too, actively colluded with colonialism and imperialism, and in the British context they even marketed themselves as especially useful to those projects. Larsen points out

that anthropologists' antipathy toward missionaries is older than the reason given for it (2024, 2).

The richer story that unfolds centers on professionalization. British anthropologists distinguished themselves from clergy and from missionaries in an effort to eliminate them as competitors in the new profession of anthropology. Anthropologists relied on missionaries in the field for practical support, and at the same time, anthropologists insisted that their expertise was distinctive and superior. Discrediting "missionary-ethnographers as biased amateurs" (2024, 4) used prestige and stigma to create a symbolic boundary between missionaries and anthropologists that was useful in establishing university departments, journals, streams of students, and all the resources necessary for a new academic discipline.

Larsen concludes that "the professionalization thesis helps to explain the "love-hate" nature of the attitude of anthropologists to missionaries" (2024, 7). Professional self-interest explains how anthropologists could be at the same time dependent upon, despising of, and distinguishing themselves from missionaries, and why the expression of this complex dependency shifted over time, becoming more public and overt from the 1960s onward. Larsen perceives a "recurring temptation by British social anthropologists to define missionaries as biased amateurs in order to shore up their own place and self-perception as professionals" (2024, 9).

This masterful untangling of a myth and illumination of a more accurate narrative could invite a similar nuanced analysis of the missionary endeavor, but this is not my focus. I want to use Larsen's

historical analysis to shine light on our present moment in the development of professional structures for Christian anthropology. Anthropologists of Christian faith are present in the discipline and in the economy in myriad places, as salt and light. As a professional niche recognizable by the presence of departments and majors, anthropology is diminishing in seminaries and Christian colleges and universities in response to demographics and economic pressures facing the higher education industry (Paris 2023). We face pressures similar to those of early British social anthropologists: self-definition, distinction, and the prospect of shoring up our own place and self-perception by diminishing other disciplines, departments, or colleagues.

We face our own recurring temptations to do what is expedient in order to secure enough institutional and economic security so that we can do the godly service we wish to do. Without departments and majors and jobs, we cannot offer the mentoring, research, writing, and lecturing we feel God has called us to. Practical concerns are serious, and the pressures we face are real: reductions in majors, closings of universities, non-replacements after retirements, induced retirements, and for anthropology in Christian colleges and universities, precious few junior faculty (Paris 2023).

Go-to narratives often highlight the missional value of a small discipline and the skill, faith, and wisdom of faculty members. This is set against the ignorance of administrators, the profit pressures of capitalism, the misguidance of the Internet, and the declension of the church. With courage and patience inspired by Larsen's historical analysis, we might develop a more accurate and nuanced view of the pressures, problems, temptations, and possible paths forward for our own time.

Professionalization requires risk and success, and once achieved, ongoing maintenance and growth; in essence, never-ending pressure for never-ending practical outputs according to the markers of success defined at a given time. Another pressure bears down before, alongside, within, and from beyond these earthly pressures: the presence of God. British Christian writer and contemplative Evelyn Underhill offered a series of broadcast talks in 1936, within the time period of some of the British social anthropologists discussed in Larsen's essay. In the first broadcast, "What is the Spiritual Life?", she directs a powerful question to the individual, one that we can extend to our reflections about anthropology as a discipline. "What function must this life fulfil in the

great and secret economy of God? How directly and fully [this] principle admits us into the glorious liberty of the children of God; where we move with such ease and suppleness, because the whole is greater than any of its parts and in that whole we have forgotten ourselves" (Underhill 2013, 35).

Ethnographic research does not reveal the dynamics of the economy of God, and it ushers neither the ethnographer nor the research participants into a life of ease and suppleness. Ethnographic research portrays the world as it presents to our sight, hearing, taste, and touch, though we never get it perfectly or completely right. The presence of God helps us see—though never perfectly or complexly—how individual lives and cultures fit with God's economy, that is, what is valuable, good, worthy, and profitable in light of eternity.

Underhill invites us to consider the meaning of our careers as individuals, and also the meaning of anthropology in Christian institutions, with a spiritual question: what function does this fulfil in the great and secret economy of God? In this light, value does not accrue only to those who earn it with their strength and competitiveness. In God's economy, value is rooted not in competition but in creation, with a full measure of esteem and belovedness bestowed on every person as a birthright. God's love bestows value and worth, not profit or growth. God's mercy sustains us, not our own risks and successes. God's time holds us from before our births and into eternity, not the timeline of an annual budget.

Departments, disciplines, and institutions do not bear God's image as persons do, and they do not have the same special gift of belovedness. But persons labor within these socially constructed artifacts, and it is reasonable to extend a merciful understanding to the structures and persons who experience upheaval and diminishment in the creative destruction processes triggered by economies. Looking at both persons and institutions in a theological light may support our understanding of what we are really doing as Christian anthropologists in both the earthly economy and in God's economy.

Underhill suggests that we may intensify our difficulties by trying to deal with the spiritual and practical elements of life as separate. Instead, she recommends we cultivate an "amphibious life" (2013, 36), learning to breath and to move easily across and between the practical and the spiritual, eventually realizing these parts of life that we have separated

symbolically with our words and stories are, in fact, parts of the whole.

Larsen's essay describes pressures that are palpable to the reader's own context today: the need for professional esteem, the desire for self-definition and prestige, the possibility of failure, the need to constantly undergird one's efforts with money and to anticipate the money needed in the future. Underhill describes a different pressure, "a hidden directive power, personal, living, free, working through circumstances and often against our intention or desire; pressing us in a certain direction, and moulding us to a certain design" (2013, 21). Alongside the pressures of practicalities, this force is also present in the world, the movement of "being drawn, at His pace and in His way, to the place where He wants us to be; not the place we fancied for ourselves" (2013, 39).

The reality of death reminds us that the pressures of temporality are always with us, different as they may be for British social anthropologists and missionaries from decades ago, and for us today. Our time is limited and will unfold, and end, in ways we do not choose. We are often tempted to assert agency in ways that stigmatize or scapegoat others, for reasons we may tell ourselves are worth the lapse in virtue. The more beautiful invitation is to tell more truthful stories, and to listen to those who expose the self-interest and delusion in our stories, so we can more clearly see our value and our place in God's economy, even as we struggle and strive for security in earthly economies.

## References

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