

## NEWS & OPINIONS

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# On Social Anthropologists and Missionary Ethnographers: Timothy Larsen Revisited

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Timothy Larsen's classic article "British Social Anthropologists and Missionaries" lays out the seemingly intractable hostility directed toward missionaries by British social anthropologists in roughly the first half of the twentieth century. His concluding sentence summarizes a convincing explanation for the repeated dismissal by anthropologists of missionary ethnographers, despite the missionaries' often superior language skills, long term relationships with locals, and material assistance rendered by missionaries to young anthropological field workers: "one constant across the twentieth century was the 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" (Larsen 2024, 9).

Although I am a mission historian and not an anthropologist, my own interest in this topic feels personal. In Yale graduate school I attended a riveting course of lectures offered by the British Roman Catholic anthropologist Mary Douglas, who repeatedly reminded us that inside each person is a mystical space into which the scholar cannot go (Douglas 1966). The essential mystery at the heart of individual identity makes room for the sacred. In the early 1990s at Boston University, I participated as commentator on anthropology conference papers that resulted in the groundbreaking book in the anthropology of Christianity edited by Robert Hefner, *Conversion to Christianity* (Hefner 1993). Another aspect of my own social location that influenced my reading of Larsen's article is the work of my husband, missiologist M.L. Daneel, who spent decades living among the Shona people of central Zimbabwe, and wrote what is still the most comprehensive ethnological and theological study of one group of African Initiated Churches (Daneel 1971, 1974, 1988). Daneel was mentored by

ethnographer Johan Holleman and was the first theologian sponsored for field work by the African Studies Centre in Leiden (Holleman 1969). I note from personal observation, then, that the stereotypes Larsen documented by envious academics against missionary scholars were still present in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century—including the tendency to plagiarize them and dismiss their ethnographic work as mere "chronicle" rather than analysis. Another aspect of the liminal space occupied by missionary scholars that Larsen did not discuss were the accusations of heresy or dereliction of duty they often faced from more traditional missionaries—but that is another subject entirely.

With regard to Larsen's fine article, it is first worth noting that many things have changed since the golden age of ethnography. For one thing, British scholars are not the dominant force in social anthropology that they were when abetted by the global reach of the former British empire. The rise of the anthropology of Christianity by the end of the century—a natural result of the rapid growth of Christianity in Asia, Africa, and Latin America—opened secular anthropologists to the importance of studying social change amid Christianization rather than expressing knee-jerk hostility to indigenous Christian movements. The postmodern context of the present age has made it clear that the social location of the anthropologist is never that of a pure neutral observer—one of the chief conceits of the professionalizing academic class that Larsen documents. And the fulltime, missionary scholar, embedded for a lifetime amidst a particular group of nonwestern people, is now a rarity compared both to a century ago and to the short-term missionary mentality of the present age.

So how were missionaries and anthropologists entangled, during the period of high British

colonialism? Relative to the period and group of scholars and missionaries under Larsen's consideration, the similarities between missionary-scholars and social anthropologists were broader than what the claims of professionals like Malinowski reveal: both were westerners who studied people unlike themselves, both had uneven but sometimes close relationships with colonial functionaries, and both accessed foreign goods. Both inhabited a third cultural space between the metropole and the colony, and between western organizations and indigenous communities. Both missionaries and anthropologists were capable of cultural ethnocentrism and racism. Thus the anthropological discourse of a century ago that posited a strict binary between the professional academic and the amateur missionary ethnographer now seems exaggerated.

In addition to key interconnections explored in Larsen's article, leading social anthropologists, especially those with creative insights about religious practices, were themselves embedded in religious communities and had close relationships with practicing Christians, if not missionaries. The father of E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973), author of the groundbreaking *Theories of Primitive Religion*, and *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, was an Anglican priest (Evans-Pritchard 1965; 1972). Evans-Pritchard was professor of social anthropology at Oxford for nearly a quarter century. His work on religion argued for the internal logic and integrity of indigenous religious systems. He converted to Catholicism while an adult. Cambridge-educated social anthropologist Monica Hunter Wilson (1908-1982) was professor at major universities in South Africa for a quarter century. Her parents were missionaries and she grew up attending the Lovedale mission school and speaking Xhosa. Her specialty was religion, and she perceived the integrated relationship between witchcraft and religious rituals (Wilson 1954). In the case of Evans-Pritchard and Wilson, one can posit a generative relationship between their own embeddedness in Christianity and their ability to understand and to conceptualize the structures and practices of religious meaning in traditional societies.

Eric Mourier-Genoud argues that transnational approaches to mission history reveal intersections between missionaries and anthropologists that extended beyond the formative pre-history of the field. One of the subjects of his investigation, anthropologist Henri-Philippe Jounod (1897-1987), was the son of the great Swiss missionary ethnographer Henri-Alexandre

Jounod mentioned by Larsen. Henri-Philippe Jounod was also an ethnologist, and he studied anthropology in order to follow in his father's footsteps—though in Mozambique rather than in Lesotho (Mourier-Genoud 2011, 197). Although the professionalization of anthropology pushed Jounod out of the guild, and he identified himself as a missionary, he was elected a member of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1949.

Edwin Smith (1876-1957), the great missionary ethnographer mentioned in Larsen's article, was also the son of missionaries in South Africa and so grew up with indigenous cultural and linguistic sensitivity. Smith became president of the British Royal Anthropological Institute in 1934, and for eight years he edited the journal *Africa*. Reference to Smith uncovers other kinds of entanglement between missionaries and anthropologists, namely their joint interest in bringing the logic of traditional cultural symbols into productive dialogue with modernity—including to resist its challenges to traditional cultures. Smith's book *The Golden Stool* (whose title echoed the classic *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer), is in my opinion the most convincing argument for the importance of anthropology in the context of western colonialism. Not only did Smith demonstrate the importance of anthropology to British colonial understanding of Nigeria, he paradoxically criticized the combination of western modernity and colonial exploitation that was dispossessing Africans of their traditional cultures (Smith 1927). Additionally, Smith's focus on linguistics was part of the wider missionary project to preserve indigenous cultures, something he undertook with other missionaries including German ethnologist and linguist Prof. Diedrich Westermann (1875-1956) of Berlin University. Westermann was an internationally known founder of African linguistics, and for three years he led the Berlin Society of Anthropology, Ethnology and Early History, as well as co-founded what is now called the International African Institute (Stine, Kokot).

I think that one of the most significant places of synergy between the missionary scholar and the anthropologist was in defining as "real" religion indigenous practices and belief systems. Nineteenth century proto anthropologists and missionaries alike believed that "primitives" lacked written religious texts and therefore had no religion. By the 1920s, though, ethnological missionaries like Edwin Smith were arguing for the logic of African belief systems as religion (Smith 1926). In other words, respect for the

indigenous sacred grew from immersion in local cultures. This kind of argument was important for combatting the racist evolutionist mindset that saw local, primal practices in Africa, the South Pacific, and elsewhere as illogical subhuman superstitions. While from a contemporary perspective, defining something as “religion” can be an example of western imposition, in the context of a century ago, to lack true religion was to be seen as backward or part of “childlike races” needing constant western tutelage. Although their purposes did not necessarily align, missionary scholars and Christian anthropologists both contributed to the growing understanding of primal religions qua religion.

Finally, looking beyond the British colonial context provides additional important examples of the entanglement between missionary ethnographers and anthropologists. The most prominent example that comes to mind is the remarkable missionary scholar Maurice Leenhardt (1878-1954), whose extensive ethnographic observations of the Kanaks of New Caledonia demonstrate how the missionary concern for linguistic and cultural indigeneity could be combined with anthropological insights to defend the integrity of a group of people hard pressed by French colonialism (Clifford 1982). As a Protestant, Leenhardt’s linguistic service to the Kanaks contributed substantially to their own sense of peoplehood, and organization for independence, vis-à-vis French settler colonialism and its default Roman Catholicism: Kanak nationalism was early expressed through a largely Protestant political movement. After his missionary service, assisted both by sociologist Marcel Mauss (nephew of Emile Durkheim) and philosopher/anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl, Leenhardt obtained a professorship in anthropology in France. His combination of pastoral concern for the Kanaks with his contributions to anthropology on the relational meaning of myths reveals the synergy between the activist missionary scholar and the supposedly neutral anthropologist.

In conclusion, Timothy Larsen’s article stands the test of time. The last word, however, does not lie in the hostility of the anthropologist toward missionary scholars, but in the myriad ways in which practicing religious scholars—whether self-styled missionaries or not—have contributed essential insights into the deep meaning of the sacred in communities and cultures around the world.

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