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# Anthropology's Origins, Christianity, and a Perspective from Africa

Jim Harries

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This article addresses the relationship between Christianity and anthropology from a perspective of the need of the church for anthropologists, and of the lack of a solid epistemological foundation for modern anthropology. Classical anthropology has been exposed as a 'broken system' by postmodern anthropologists, but buried assumptions from the classical model continue to run by faith on prior momentum. A re-integration of anthropology into a Christian theological paradigm is proposed as the means of honestly, truthfully, and genuinely, providing a rootedness and foundation for anthropology's future development. Work on the embodiment of language helps to provide means for opening a legitimate space between objectivity and subjectivity in this article.

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*By 1930 missionary ethnographers had been largely marginalised by professional anthropology, but... missionaries continued to shape knowledge about Africa into the recent past. (Harries and Maxwell 2012:7, 28)*

*We are convinced that for lack of such [anthropological] knowledge much missionary preaching is like striking the empty air. (William Burton, cited by Maxwell 2012:169)<sup>1</sup>*

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**Jim Harries** has been a missionary in East Africa since 1988. He chairs the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission. Author email: jimoharries@gmail.com.

This article argues for an active role of anthropologists in a revitalised church as a basis for future scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Anthropology's current dearth of epistemological foundations are shown to indicate an urgent need for a re-appropriation of its Christian roots. The Christian church is shown to benefit much from what a faith-based anthropology would have to offer.

Anthropology now considers itself a secular discipline. But denial of the existence of God is always futile—because he might be where one is not looking. Much of human life, including its purpose, is not evident through biological existence alone. Our life being a mystery makes understanding of human identity extremely vulnerable to direction given through divine revelation. Ignoring God, especially when he was very

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<sup>1</sup> Burton, file correspondence with Wits, 1929. University of Witwatersrand Art Galleries, Box W.F.P.

<sup>2</sup> Notes regarding this article:

- a) The capitalisation of God in this article may not be consistent. The convention whereby the one true God is capitalised, but reference to other gods is not, is hard to sustain consistently when the identity of God (god) is itself under consideration.
- b) At different points in this article I use the term *anthropos* to refer to humankind, so as to emphasise the link between anthropology and theology through the use of Greek.
- c) Anthropology discussed here is the contemporary western scholarly discipline that was founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- d) The author of this article being a theologian accustomed to interacting with indigenous African churches, readers should recognise the application of a sometimes-unconventional pre-suppositional base to anthropological discussion. Some of the sources of information for this article are informal, drawing from oral societies. Secular efforts at expunging the role of Christian influences on the development of the West, make it particularly difficult to find contemporary scholarly sources to support all that is claimed. A classic example of this is referred to by Masuzawa: "In its heyday ... comparative theology was a very popular, highly regarded, and respectable intellectual-spiritual pursuit [of which today we find] ... willful ignorance" (2005:22-23). Comparative theology was the study of non-Christian beliefs in the light of faith in Christ. It amounted to a massive literature amassed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Our not taking seriously comparative theologians' view of others, built on the basis of ongoing conviction regarding the truth of their own faith, "may be our loss" Masuzawa adds (2005:104).
- e) References in this article to Christianity and to the church should be taken as being holistic in nature. My position is not confined to a particular theological stance, only to understanding of the Bible, or only to expression by educated African theologians, but focuses on engagement with functioning Christians in existing churches in Africa.

much attended to by one's forefathers, along with most of the non-Western world, is tantamount to intellectual self-deception. This applies to other disciplines than just anthropology, but my focus here will be on the impact on anthropology of ignoring its Christian roots.

Anthropology has sometimes hidden its own real position behind an aversion to generalisations. Scholars accused of making generalisations regarding non-Western societies are, I here suggest, often simply indicating differences with the West. But the West, apparently through embarrassment arising from its own rooting in Christian faith, has been reluctant to acknowledge that it has a unique stance compared to the rest of the world. Modern anthropology is rooted in Christianity. People who practice modern anthropology implicitly carry assumptions that have come down to them from Christianity, whether or not they acknowledge that fact. By refusing its own Christian roots, anthropology is unjustly denying the non-Western world access to the secrets of its own discipline.

The above is not to say that anthropologists are either incompetent or unwanted. Instead this article suggests that weaknesses in contemporary mission efforts on the side of the West reaching the majority world with the gospel, can indirectly be blamed on the absence of the kinds of insights that anthropologists could have provided. Those insights are lost because anthropology that began as a service to the mission of the church strayed into serving commercial, government, and career interests. The church, especially in its missionary role, desperately needs many of the skills that devoted anthropologists possess.

My readers should realise that this argument may be difficult to appreciate for those living in the West. It is not easy to credit a youthful Judahite, crucified centuries ago, whose known history has been openly deplored by many especially liberal scholars, with influencing the shape of anthropology today. But I do not live in the West. I write this article out of almost 30 years of 'vulnerable' missionary service in southern, then eastern, Africa.<sup>3</sup> The enthusiasm of many African people's faith in the Gospel of Jesus is partly due to an awareness of the horror of the alternatives they had

prior to becoming Christians, difficult circumstances that many in the West have in recent generations forgotten. I draw upon these African epistemologies and sensibilities to make the argument here that Christianity has brought much good to cultures and has influenced *anthropos* for the better.<sup>4</sup>

## Generalisations in the Anthropological Guild

Some of the contents of this article may come across as being of the nature of *generalisations*. I want to defend the making of so-called generalisations in intercultural research. There are, I suggest, certain norms in many African communities that members of those communities unquestioningly presuppose. Some of those norms are different from those of dominant contemporary Western communities. Drawing on or presupposing such norms in academic writing is not making unjustified generalisations, it is being realistic about contextual differences. Because silence speaks, not making generalisations can be failing to recognize the ways in which *the West* is different, and tacitly but incorrectly attributing Western assumptions to Africa.

A major, but little referred to, contributor to conscious self-blinding of Western people about African reality ironically arises from efforts to counter racism. In the USA, major efforts are constantly made not to treat black people differently according to their colour.<sup>5</sup> The norm in anti-racism in the USA is to treat everyone in the same way as 'ordinary' Americans. Such a norm, which in effect sets up the American white as 'model,' has become internationalised.<sup>6</sup> The wider implications in Africa of such a stance are not always considered. It puts Westerners, particularly, under enormous pressure to treat blacks in Africa as if they are Westerners. Hence the condemnation of so called 'generalisations' if they present African blacks as different from Western norms. This condemnation can fly in the face of truth and, ironically, reduce Africans to underdeveloped Westerners.<sup>7</sup>

Anthropologists are required to articulate what they discover in a way that is acceptable to their Western home community. That is, their accounts, to be credit worthy, must presuppose what is accepted wisdom in

<sup>3</sup> Use of the term 'vulnerable' here indicates ministry carried out using local people's languages and resources. For more on this see [vulnerablemission.org](http://vulnerablemission.org)

<sup>4</sup> A written source to guide us here is Tjijenda's account of mission history amongst the Herero-Mbanderu people of Namibia (2012:141-152). 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary Carl Hugo Hahn has apparently been criticised for having a 'low' opinion of the lives of the Herero-Mbanderu people prior to their receiving the Gospel, considering them to have been victim to all the vices mentioned by Paul in Romans 1:29-30 (unrighteousness, wickedness, covetousness, evil, envy, murder, strife ... etc.). Should we as a result consider Hahn a "slanderer ... [and] enemy of the Herero-Mbanderu people?" Tjijenda asks? No, he was "truthfully describing our spiritual condition" at the time, Tjijenda answers. Tjijenda believes that Hahn should be thanked for bringing the light of God.

<sup>5</sup> See for example <http://www.antiracistalliance.com/>

<sup>6</sup> Hence it is supported by the United Nations: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CERD.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> See also Harries (2017:13-18).

the West, then add an exotic extra(s). They must not presuppose differences between the 'culture' that they are exploring with the West without justification at length using the pre-existing scholarly literature. To otherwise propose the existence of such a difference is considered to be making a generalisation.

Because every anthropologist is subject to essentially the same restrictions, the presumed audience is always Western, legitimacy in anthropology is achieved through satisfying a readership whose presuppositions are Western. Still, anthropologists do build on each other's work by citing one another as authorities for statements that they make. Hence anthropologists introduce their readers to tenets of understanding that are peculiar, i.e. generally unfamiliar to the West.

Within the guild, however, anthropologists must be careful not to accept the same tenets themselves. For example, an anthropologist can tell us that a certain people *believe* that anyone who crosses a river will be killed by a particular spirit. The anthropologist is not however authorised later in the text to say that a certain person who died after crossing the river was killed by that spirit. Neither is he or she enabled, therefore, either to demonstrate or to explore ways in which life unravels in the light of people's ontologies as practiced, if their beliefs run contrary to secular/scientific-norms. The anthropologist has to presuppose causation that follows a Western mechanical worldview. They may say 'the people *believed that* a particular death was caused by such a breaking of taboo', while directly or indirectly making it clear that they do not themselves go along with such belief. As a result, an anthropologist is not permitted to explore *the implications of* other than Western beliefs in all their contextual out workings. The question, 'how does the world work for people who accept that crossing the river causes death by taboo?' is mute.<sup>8</sup> The anthropologist just does not accept it.

The above makes access to the anthropological guild very difficult for non-Westerners. To contribute to the guild, non-Westerners must first thoroughly immerse themselves in Western thinking, discourse styles and rules of engagement. In their writing, they must pre-suppose Western assumptions. So also Westerners who have adopted epistemological foundations that they have met on the field that are

other than classically Western, are delegitimized.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, as Halliburton (2004) demonstrates, true anthropologists operate from a Western worldview; Gramsci is a fellow researcher whereas Gandhi is an object of research. Because science is something that the West has 'discovered', when science is considered foundational to anthropology, every new account that is to be taken seriously must be grafted into Western thinking.<sup>10</sup>

The above begs the question; is anthropology a universal discipline, or a provincial service to the West? If it is universal, then why is access to it only acquired through picking up certain apparently arbitrary (Western) presuppositions and using them as a basis to write? A serious limitation of anthropology is that, as we have seen above, it cannot, and so should not claim to be able to, give a 'native description'. That is to say, an anthropologist's account of a people will of necessity be different from the way that they understand themselves.<sup>11</sup>

## The Theological Roots of Anthropology

Thus far, I have questioned the legitimacy of anthropology's claim to any kind of universalism. Going further than this, I suggest that anthropology's foundations are specifically in Christianity, including its understanding of God. This article argues below that there is no alternative but for human understanding to be rooted in certain theological presuppositions. This includes anthropological understanding. And it means that theologians who bring theological presuppositions to the light, so that they can be discussed and questioned, are doing work that is inherently prior to anthropology, and on which anthropologists are epistemologically dependent.

Many anthropologists consider what they do to be justified on the basis that anthropology is scientific. That is, they consider that because anthropology is a science, and science is objective, an anthropological perspective is in some ultimate way privileged over and above other perspectives. For some, this is rather a sacred cow, without which a great deal of the justification for the discipline collapses. After all, if anthropologists are adding just one more subjective perspective to an already congested field of opinions, then why are they privileged above any other less highly paid observer of

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<sup>8</sup> This muteness of anthropology is more recently being challenged by moves in anthropology to take 'religious' beliefs seriously. See also the discussion below on science in anthropology.

<sup>9</sup> People who have done this can be considered to have 'gone native'.

<sup>10</sup> Some anthropologists may chafe at these suggestions; Western people do not always like to see themselves as being limited in the way I have described above. If I seem to be trying to speak from a position of supra-anthropology, then indeed it is so. The supra-position is that of theology. More on this below.

<sup>11</sup> This can clearly be seen in the fact that English is nearly always the language of anthropological discourse. English, of course, has very different categories than the languages used by non-Western people being studied.

*anthropos*? They might be just a “vocal, emotional do-gooder group who’ll use any argument,” Hames tells us.<sup>12</sup>

The above issue has led to considerable dispute, especially in the American Anthropological Association (AAA). In 2010, the AAA stated:

Until now, the association’s long-range plan was ‘to advance anthropology as the science that studies humankind in all its aspects.’ The executive board revised this last month to say, ‘The purposes of the association shall be to advance public understanding of humankind in all its aspects.’... The word ‘science’ has been excised from two other places in the revised statement.<sup>13</sup>

To some, such excising of ‘science’ from the AAA’s description of its central purpose was a “slap”,<sup>14</sup> meaning that “fluff-head cultural anthropological types”<sup>15</sup> would take charge. Hames raises the question which we have already raised in a slightly different way in this article: if children are dying, “are we to accept the local explanation that children are dying...because someone is breaking a taboo and the gods are angry,...or do we look to see how fecal matter is being introduced to the water supply?”<sup>16</sup> On one hand, those in favour of the removal of ‘science,’ perceive that “it embodies Westernized and colonial ideals.”<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, few are looking to the deeper ontological issues which might be addressed by taking non-science seriously. That is in its outworking; by an appeal to theology.

Post-modern thought has been pointing to weaknesses in the previously presupposed positivist understanding that all knowledge can be rooted in science. Hence the issues faced by the AAA. I suggest that the foundation of anthropological truth cannot be in anthropology itself, or in science, or in reason. It must be in an openly theological understanding of the universe, including a transcendent God. There is no “social or economic reality that is permanently more ‘basic’ than the religious ... [there is a] critical non-avoidability of the theological and metaphysical” (Milbank 1990:3). If an all-powerful God were to say,

in terms of a certain dispute between anthropologists, “anthropologist A is correct and anthropologist B is wrong,” who could argue? Wittgenstein makes this point in terms of values: “the sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. *In* it there is no value—and if there were, it would be of no value. If there is value which is of value, it must lie outside of all happening and being-so” (2007:105).<sup>18</sup>

If anthropologists cannot root their discipline in theology, then their presuppositions are contingent. To make declarations based on contingent presuppositions as if they are absolute is to state things without justification. It is to implicitly, without justification, condemn alternative theological foundations. Honesty requires open acknowledgement of one’s theological position. I suggest that the above dispute by the AAA does not have a clear resolution outside of theology, something that seems to be supported by the fact that the dispute is “as old as the field itself,” going back at least to 1904.<sup>19</sup> I would suggest that because our actions are always carried out on the basis of theological presuppositions, we have no choice but to ‘believe in God’, in some sense or another of the latter term.

Faith in God seemed to become optional when the West turned to mind-body dualism, hence:

Many western Christians rest their faith on God being in the real as against the unreal category, on his being supernatural as against “natural,” and on his being external to the human mind yet able to communicate with it “from the outside.”<sup>20</sup> If categories of “real” and “unreal” are abolished, then on what basis does a Christian believe? Atheists similarly seem to rest their faith on the reverse being the case, and the outcome of abolishing “real” versus “unreal” is the same for them as well, that is, on what basis does one “not believe”? It is to me ironic that so many Westerners consider these contingent modern western-produced categories to be necessary foundation stones to their faith in God, or their faith in not God. (Harries 2017:64)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/11/30/anthroscience>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/10/science/10anthropology.html>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Anthropologists-Debate-Whether/125571>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/11/30/anthroscience>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/11/30/anthroscience>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/11/30/anthroscience>

<sup>18</sup> I might question just what Wittgenstein means here by ‘outside’? He may be assuming a Cartesian dualism that I would rather question.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Anthropologists-Debate-Whether/125571>

<sup>20</sup> Luhmann et al, 2010:71.

This essay does not claim to resolve all of the issues involved in Western dualism for anthropology. It does advocate, by acknowledging the particular roots of anthropological thinking in theology, that they be brought out into the open and acknowledged as having emerged from a Christian history. Once that is done, non-Westerners will begin to be able to perceive anthropology's foundations, and to intelligently engage with it, if they are inclined to do so.<sup>21</sup> A primary entry way to anthropology will be adoption of Christian theology, including re-analysis of just what it was about 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Christian theology that allowed the modern discipline to emerge at the time. Then, decisions can be made about what to accept and what to change along the way toward new versions of the discipline.

As a reminder, if we do not acknowledge this history, we put Westerners in the position of a transcendent, God-like, status, and doom non-Westerners to a perpetual second-class status (Ogunnaike 2016:786). Either anthropology as we know it should identify itself as being 'Christian anthropology', or it should no longer be considered legitimate until it opens itself up to extra-Christian presuppositional foundations. The latter would turn anthropology into 'anything goes', which would leave no identifiable discipline, as there would be no boundaries to what might or might not be considered anthropology. So, for the sake of honesty, anthropology should acknowledge the theology in which it is rooted. We could add here that, if Christianity is at the root of today's anthropological perspectives, then if someone wants to learn how to take an anthropological perspective, they need to become Christian. In other words, to encourage others (non-westerners) to join their discipline, anthropologists need to become missionaries, sharing the Gospel out of which the study of humanity emerged.

## **Anthropologists and Missionaries**

As a Christian missionary in his twenty-ninth year of practicing in Africa I would like to say to anthropologists that: *we need you*. Anthropology

emerged for a reason and in a context. Some anthropology emerged particularly from attempts by Christian missionaries to answer troubling questions regarding the nature of their ministries. For instance, "Anthropology in Britain had its origins in the broad Christian humanitarian movement of the nineteenth century" shares Hiebert (nd.). But the gap between missionaries and anthropologists has widened over the years. It was the disdain of professional anthropologists that brought a lot of research by missionaries to a halt (Harries and Maxwell 2012:21). Professional anthropologists had largely marginalised missionary anthropological research by about 1930 (2012:7). Yet Cannell's work shows, I think rather conclusively, how the 'secular' discipline of anthropology arose through a kind of mirroring of a position in Christian theology that it rejected.<sup>22</sup>

Anthropological research is, as I have mentioned above, like every other type of human activity, theologically and philosophically contingent. Philosophically the ground has shifted considerably since anthropology was founded.<sup>23</sup> As secularism grew to take centre stage in Western culture, anthropology concealed its theological roots and embraced a position that was overtly hostile to faith in God. Its various theories of 'religion' reduced variant ontologies to mistaken or self-interested illusions.<sup>24</sup> Now, epistemologically speaking, when all this is being questioned, parts of the anthropological endeavour are suspended in mid-air.

Sometimes pragmatically the best way to deal with a threat is to ignore it. Anthropologists have ignored some of the undermining of their beliefs. The presupposition of the legitimacy of the anthropologists' role continues after all to result in apparently fruitful activity. One might not blame anthropologists for 'carrying on' regardless. Their predicament is not so different from that of secularism as a whole. Yet one might like to ask for honesty, given especially that anthropologists interact with a lot of people unfamiliar with western secularism,<sup>25</sup> and to concede that their foundation is held only 'by faith'. The confident apparent certainty of 19th century philosophy was buried in the 20th century. We're in the soup together,

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<sup>21</sup> While anthropology continues to conceal its theologies, non-Westerners wanting to engage with it typically have to imitate, learn by rote, copy, accept what they do not understand, and so on. Once it's theological presuppositions are made overt, they will be enabled to engage with it through theology.

<sup>22</sup> I have discussed Cannell's work in more detail elsewhere (Harries 2015:160; Harries 2016:72).

<sup>23</sup> Anthropology as a generic 'study of man' is as old as the human species. Anthropology as contemporary western scholarly / university discipline was founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>24</sup> More recently, the very existence of the category 'religion' as something that is distinct from 'Christianity', is being questioned (Asad 2009:397).

<sup>25</sup> There are many secularisms in today's world, that are understood differently in different parts of the world. By way of example, I discovered in conversation recently with a Kenyan scholar that 'secular' meant for him 'not-Christian', which he interpreted as 'following African traditions'. See also Calhoun et al. (2011).

rationally speaking; only theological presuppositions enable ultimate truth claims.

Anthropologists need theology, and in my view, missionaries need anthropologists. When Beidelman wrote that missionaries have a “muddled view” of Africans (1982:127), I am sure he was not entirely wrong. Are anthropologists ready to help them out? There is great need for people to concentrate on studying the nature of and ways of life of non-western societies. The urgency of the need to alleviate “global deprivation” should not stop us investing in “philosophical fieldwork” (Flikschuh 2014:2). The church needs anthropologists. God needs them. The majority world needs them. The kinds of anthropologists needed, however, are those ready to be open to, and not hostile to, faith in God, who value Christian mission and cultural transformation.

### **Anthropology and Christian Ministry**

The study of *anthropos* belongs in the church. It continues to go on in the church, including through theological work and Christian preaching. But the church seems to have lost some of the legitimacy of its study of humanity in favour of that which we might today call secular anthropology. What if anthropologists were to rejoin the church in its task of bringing the gospel to cultures? The following demonstrates how they might help the translation process involved.

Missionaries come to places like Africa so as to share the word of God with people. When I use the term God here, I refer to a view or interpretation regarding the nature and activities of God. Missionaries have carried the conviction that there are important things about God that ought to be shared with others. Christian missionaries believe, for example, that God is one, that he is a God of love, he is Trinitarian, that we can learn about him by studying the sacred record of the history of Israel,<sup>26</sup> and so on. Many of the same missionaries have been convicted of the need to translate God's word (the Bible) into other languages.

In order to translate God's word into other languages around the world missionaries have selected vernacular terms that are ‘equivalents’ to Greek and English words that have a long Christian history. These terms, let us consider especially the term for God, can of course only approximate to the impact of the term *theo* in Greek. The same terms invariably carry massive amounts of content related to the customs and cultures

of the people concerned. The terms need to be transformed by their use, with respect to the Bible, in the Christian church and in the Christian communities. This is all part of making disciples. Jesus himself had disciples (Greek *mathétés*); now we should be making others into disciples of Jesus (Matthew 28:19). Teaching people to be disciples of Jesus should transform the ways in which their language(s) are used, so that the vernacular assumed ‘equivalents’ that translate biblical terms acquire Christian meanings. Ironically though, although Bibles are translated and many have agreed that the Gospel can be communicated in any language,<sup>27</sup> *the languages of formal theological education in use in Africa are predominantly if not exclusively European*. Instead of impacting a change in vernacular word meanings, theological education bypasses pagan meanings leaving them intact. Vernacular language Bibles thus continue to be interpreted according to indigenous non-Christianised word impacts or meanings.

For example, what then are commonly held African understandings of 'God'? Terms with which I am familiar are of the nature of *provider*. Terms for God used in western Kenya such as *Were*, *Nyasaye*, *Nyakalaga*, all carry implications that this is someone (or something) that provides for our needs.<sup>28</sup> While there is overlap between such a notion of God and the God of the Bible the overlap is far from complete. The God of the Bible is one who is more than just a provider; he has plans for the eternal salvation of members of human kind who believe in him. This larger view is partly why, rather than turning to God daily as the source of human prosperity, the West has rejected God's role in the practice of economics. Here is a major difference. In Africa, god is the provider. In the secular west, god is irrelevant to material provision! When the dominant view of God in Africa remains that of provider, is it any wonder that secular development projects planned for Africa by Westerners flounder? Western Christians do also have something to learn from Africans in this, whose experience and understanding of daily dependence on God is closer to the biblical worldview than to secularism.

Here I would like to draw on the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in order to make the point that such cross-cultural and cross-linguist work is both possible and valuable. Lakoff and Johnson identify a foundation of human thinking, including philosophical thinking, that is neither objective nor subjective (1999:26). They tell us that the thinking of *anthropos* is

<sup>26</sup> I.e. the Old Testament.

<sup>27</sup> “The path to the native African church lay through the development of the vernacular” (Sameh 1989:134).

<sup>28</sup> A literal translation of *Nyasaye* into English is ‘the fertility (prosperity) that comes through prayer’. The *Nyak* in *Nyakalaga* implies fertility, apparently coming from Allah (‘*ala*’), presumably arising from historical contact between Luo people who are now in Kenya, and Muslims.

rooted in the functioning of people's physical bodies. Thinking then is not, and apparently cannot be, pure or abstract. Instead, basic spatial reasoning provides the metaphoric foundation for all other reasoning. That is why there are so many similarities in ways of thinking between people from different parts of the world. Such metaphors are almost universal because they arise from nearly universal human experience. Lakoff and Johnson refer to these as primary metaphors (1999:57). According to them one "inevitably acquire(s) an enormous range of primary metaphors just by going about the world constantly moving and perceiving" (1999:57). For example, there is a metaphor that suggests that up is better. This metaphor has us say things like 'they are coming up' or 'this has caused my spirits to rise'. According to Lakoff and Johnson, all adult people the world over understand the metaphor that *up is more*, because everyone can observe a "rise and fall of levels of piles and fluids as more is added or subtracted" (1999:51).

According to Lakoff and Johnson, because all knowledge is rooted in metaphors that arise from particular physical relationships, no profound knowledge is truly objective. The epistemological foundations for knowing that they suggest are the human body and physical forces. Human knowing being subjective in ways that are not arbitrary opens the possibility of inter-subjective knowing. With this possibility in mind, anthropologists could provide good service to Christian discipling efforts by pointing out where there is commonality and where there is difference in understanding.<sup>29</sup>

Anthropologists who have resisted Christian missionary work have not always recognised how many of their own assumptions are rooted in Christian influence on Western culture. For instance, the Western tendency not to associate all misfortune or suffering with human culpability can clearly be seen in multiple biblical teachings, classically perhaps Luke 13:1-5 and the book of Job. Indigenous African views on culpability are vastly different than this. Misfortune in Africa always seems to have a human cause, either of the person suffering (breaking of taboo or sin) or of someone else's untoward intent (witchcraft).<sup>30</sup> That the West does not necessarily consider either the sufferer

or a third party in some way guilty for a person's misfortune is partly due to Jesus' own words (in the text above). For Africans this new view can produce a profound release from the need to place blame on themselves or others for tragic misfortunes.

The West has an implicit understanding of Christianity acquired over many generations of church life and teaching.<sup>31</sup> Denying the benefits of Christian faith to others elsewhere is an injustice that emerges from a kind of 'cultural fundamentalism' (Sanneh 1993:29). It can be added, and Gifford points us to this, that Africa has 'seen through' the denial by the West of its Christian roots. Vast numbers of African people have become Christians—in the face of Western efforts, in the name of secularism, to try to discourage them from doing so: "It was widely thought that Christianity in Africa would become increasingly less significant... this prediction has proved completely false... Christianity is now perhaps the most salient social force in sub-Saharan Africa" (Gifford 2015:11-12). Some of the reason for the dramatic Christianization of the African subcontinent over the last century can be seen to be the result of African recognition of the benefits of Christianity in the West.

One final example. Lakoff and Johnson tell us that in the West there is a metaphor that: "a purposeful life is a journey" (1999:61). This metaphor has a profound impact on the way Western people live, in which "life goals are destinations" and "a life plan is an itinerary." Yet "there are cultures around the world in which this metaphor does not exist" (1999:63), say Lakoff and Johnson. Non-Western people who do not have the metaphor will as a result remain "perennial protégés" (Tshehla 2002:19), trying to function without a central piece of the puzzle of modern life.

How did the West manage to pick up this metaphor that has proved so essential for the development of its contemporary life? Lakoff and Johnson concede that this metaphor "does not have an experiential ground of its own" (1999:63). Amongst possible origins for this metaphor, Christian teaching must be the major contender, providing as it does a linear rather than a circular view of life. Communicated religiously, received with devotion and commitment, welcomed deep into peoples' hearts, over the whole Western

<sup>29</sup> Lakoff and Johnson have had their critics amongst the burgeoning literature that has emerged from their work: "The alleged conceptual power of metaphor may be more limited than originally claimed," Steen suggests (2014:kindle version). Critics can however be faulted in a way that runs in parallel to a key issue raised in this article; critics of Lakoff and Johnson have ignored theology. Lakoff and Johnson's critics have assumed the view that metaphor is "the deviant language of poets, politicians, and patients" to have been "*the dominant view for more than two millennia*" (my emphasis, Steen 2014:kindle version). That can only be considered to have been the dominant view by people who ignore theology. Reconsidering the dominance of theology as we have done in this article, given that theology is profoundly metaphorical, undermines, it seems to me, much of the recent criticism aimed at Lakoff and Johnson's work.

<sup>30</sup> These two are related. For example, behaviour that is likely to upset the ancestors is also likely to result in one being bewitched.

<sup>31</sup> To further consider this goes beyond the boundaries of this article. I encourage the reader to look at other articles that I have written. From an African point of view, Westerners who deny being Christian still seem to have some incredibly Christian values.

population, it seems clear that the "life is a journey" metaphor has arisen from biblical teaching and Christian history.

There are implications of this specific situation for African development. Many metaphors in English inherently build on the "life is a journey" metaphor. For example, progress is slow, life's wheels are spinning, difficulties in life should be anticipated, and that one should have goals in life, and so on (Lakoff and Johnson 1999:60-63). Presumably these metaphors are, or at least were, absent amongst African people. What happens when an African person embroiled in traditional African thinking comes across such metaphors, either through learning of English in school, or through translation into their mother tongue? The answer must be that they make little sense, and development work which might benefit local people is as a result impeded. Bringing Africa into a 'belief system' such as Christianity, therefore, may well be a prerequisite for mutual understanding between the West and Africa, and then in due course for sustainable indigenously powered African development. Here too, anthropologists could have an important role to play.

### **The Need for a Return to Theology**

Anthropology seems to be running on borrowed steam. A big question for contemporary anthropology is, 'on which foundation?' Some anthropologists do not seem to acknowledge that there is any epistemological or ontological foundation to their craft, so almost anything goes. Others are determinedly, it seems, in the light of ever mounting evidence to the contrary, sticking by their faith in science and the apparent certainty that was expressed by previous generations.<sup>32</sup> This discussion should be making it clear that the foundation that best 'fits' anthropology is Christianity. Anthropology needs to begin by catching up to contemporary theology. It is operating with an outdated image of Christian theology, one frozen in time in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when it rebelled against Christian faith (Cannell 2006). The engagement between them could help to stimulate a major revitalisation of both the Christian faith and anthropology.

Lakoff and Johnson provide us with a healthy critique of analytical philosophy. Analytical philosophers assume pure reason to be disembodied. For them reasoning can be independent of context and independent of the body. Nonsense, say Lakoff and Johnson (1999:5-8). In contrast, Lakoff and Johnson demonstrate how human reasoning is profoundly

dependent on metaphors that arise from physical activities and from humans' engagement with their geography. For Lakoff and Johnson, human thinking is integrally linked in to human activity in this world. Theoretical and supposedly 'abstract' thinking is all embodied. Thinking could not function at all (except perhaps to use Lakoff and Johnson's metaphor, at a very basic skeletal level [1999:58]) without the use of metaphors that must be interpreted in terms of our physical existence in a material world.

Christian thinking is thoroughly embodied. It has to be, as it has developed and grown over generations of inter-human and human-to-context engagement. Christian thinking is not a recent invention that has unexpectedly emerged from nowhere on the back of a transient worldview such as that of the analytical philosophers. Christianity is a universal message of good news for all mankind. Those of us concerned with making the Christian message more widely known need to understand *anthropos*, and that is why we need anthropologists. Anthropologists need to benefit too, from the richness and depth of the vision of humanity and its circumstances that Christian thought has carried down through time and across cultures.

The church is riven through with faults, I hope there is no doubt about that. But the church does not proclaim itself. The church proclaims Christ, the Son of God. It does not claim to have realised perfection. It does claim to be following the person who declared himself to be the truth (John 14:6). The church needs renewal, revitalisation, and always a return to a more profound level of commitment. And it needs anthropologists; it needs those people whose heart-felt interest drives them to explore the 'other'. It needs the anthropologist as partner in the work—together subject to the divine will that provides a body, a unity, a light on a hill exposed and in view to a world that is all-too-dark (Matthew 5:14). Anthropologists, welcome back home.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This article articulates a claim that anthropology arose from the interests of the Christian church, remains integrally Christian, and could benefit both itself and Christian bodies, especially in their intercultural mission efforts, by a re-integration into Christianity. It does this through examining contemporary developments in the church, in anthropology, and in understanding of the world at large. It advocates adjustments to contemporary practice in anthropology arising from developments in

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<sup>32</sup> Spiro cites well known philosopher Hannah Arendt defending a 'scientific' or 'counter-post-modern' view of anthropology for pragmatic reasons: "Metaphysical realism is" needed so as to confront "unwelcome factual truths" according to Arendt (cited by Spiro 1996:776). Anthropology defends its truth claims for pragmatic reasons even while acknowledging that they have little basis in ultimate reality, something for which anthropology's founding fathers condemned their theologian-predecessors.



understanding of theological and philosophical foundations that have arisen since its founding in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Early anthropologists rejected theology in favour of the claim that science was founded on objectivity. This claim has since been undermined. The foundational worldview from which anthropology emerged was clearly Christianity. The contemporary church needs anthropologists. Demands put on anthropologists by the church will be different from those they find themselves subject to under secular government or commercial interests. The absconding of anthropologists and their at times misguidedly attacking the church has presumably contributed to weaknesses in missionary practice, such as recently the failure to realise in Africa the necessity of the use of indigenous languages in discipleship training. The ongoing activities of contemporary anthropology, now a discipline that is largely rudderless and rooted in an outdated faith, are alienating the non-western world, much of which is Christian.

Anthropology cannot stand high and dry from the storms of change raging in today's world. Is it time to swallow hard, gather courage, speak boldly, and tell truth to power? Secular structures that have apparently enabled the West to thrive are crumbling in the face of globalisation. Anthropological wisdom is great, it needs to be turned to new times, to assist in the honest declaration of God's truths.

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