

The Anthropology of Christianity: Beyond Missions and Conversion

Review of:

Austin-Broos, Diane *Jamaica Genesis: Religion and the Politics of Moral Orders*
Chicago:U Chicago Press (1997)

Meyer, Brigit *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana*
Trenton, NJ/Asmara:Africa World Press, Inc. (1999)

Robbins, Joel *Becoming Sinners: Christianity + Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society*
Berkeley:U California Press (2004)

Frederick, Marla *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*
Berkeley:U California Press (2003)

There are many within the Christian academy, and arguably more outside it, who consider “Christian Anthropology” to be oxymoronic. Even beyond sophisticated (if misguided) theological positions declaring disciplines such as cultural anthropology to be indelibly secular and incompatible with a Christian view of the world (cf: Milbank 1991), the historic conflict between missionaries and anthropologists in the field, and the more recent yet glaringly public clash between Christian anti-evolutionists and the secular anthropologists who serve as their foil (e.g., the late Stephen Jay Gould, or Louis Leakey) has left a peculiar and particular mark on the place of anthropology vis a vis the Christian world.(Bonsen, Marks, and Miedema 1990; also Douglas 2001; Priest 2001)

This history of antagonism has become written into the academic life of Christians and Christian institutions, manifest to this day. While there are no liberal arts colleges among the top 50 of U.S. News and World Report without an anthropology major (excluding technical institutes and Wabash College), there are only five schools in the CCCU (out of 105) who offer the major. Many CCCU institutions do not even have an anthropologist on the faculty, no doubt at least partly the result of the contentious and mistrustful relationship between Christians and anthropologists. Of course, anthropology has found a peculiar niche in evangelicalism among the missions departments of seminaries. A number of gifted anthropologists hold these important posts, yet struggle against a perception that their role is primarily in training – preparing the troops for the field – while the academic heavy lifting should be left to the theologians and Bible scholars. The perception seems to be that while anthropology might have some practical benefit for missions, to really think about God, Christ, Christianity and the World, stick with theology and biblical studies.

Secular anthropologists have certainly been no help in addressing this antagonism. While anthropologists have built a discipline on studying marginal and “out-of-the-way” peoples, Christians, particularly Protestant (evangelical, fundamentalists, they’re all the same, right?) have been off the anthropological radar. With a few notable exceptions, when Christianity has appeared in the writings of secular anthropologists, it has been as more cultural myth than ethnographic reality, or as a way to talk about something else (colonialism, economic change, gender) that was the real focus of the study. (cf: Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; 1997; see also Priest 2001;

Robbins 2003) Christianity, to the extent that it has been studied or analyzed at all, has been reduced to a two-dimensional psychological, economic or political phenomenon.

But for a variety of reasons, some documented, others only speculative, things on the secular side are beginning to change. (Douglas 2001; cf.: Robbins 2001; Stromberg 1994) In the past 10 years, several anthropological monographs dealing with Christians *qua* Christians have appeared, suggesting that anthropologists are ready to admit that Christianity in the places anthropologists typically work is a cultural phenomenon with integrity and authenticity. Not surprisingly, the attention has generally focused on the most rapidly growing and ritually vibrant form of Christianity in the non-Western world, Pentecostalism, but there is no doubt that these ethnographic works represent new territory for the field; one that Christians who want to understand the state of our own faith in the world would do well to take very seriously.

Although there are several more ethnographies beside the ones reviewed here that could legitimately fit the criterion of anthropological research taking non-Western Christianity as a locally valid cultural form, they are still very few compared to anthropological literature as a whole. Indeed, as the author of the most recently published book reviewed here argues, there is not, yet, anything that can legitimately be called an anthropology of Christianity. (Robbins 2003; 2004: 27-34) In my mind, part of this comes from what I think is a clear difference between anthropological studies of conversion and research on the character of Christianity taken as a cultural form. Conversion research, by its very nature, focuses on culture change and tends to treat the new religion as the “invader” or foreign element, making serious attempts to grapple with the nature of the religion as a lived culture hard to pull off. (Brusco 1996; also Howell 1996) However, the stirrings of an identifiable anthropology of Christianity are there and in several recent and well-done ethnographies, anthropologists are announcing the place of the discipline as one that brings profound methodological and theoretical resources to the table; resources we Christians should embrace for ourselves.

In terms of the sheer body of literature, there is probably no area of world Christianity more well-studied than Latin America. Given the extraordinary, and now fairly venerable, shift among vast segments of the population of the continent from Catholicism to evangelicalism, this should be no surprise. But where sociologists and historians have produced a number of important works (Chesnut 1997; Freston 2001; Martin 1990; 2002), anthropologists have not made their mark in monographs that might be expected. Those writing on the religion, like many, tend to make conversion the focus, leaving development, practice and elaboration of Christianity outside their purview.¹ Thus, the best representative of an ethnography of Christianity from the generally Central/South American context comes from the English-speaking Caribbean island of Jamaica.

Diane Austin-Broos begins her work, *Jamaica Genesis: Religion and the Politics of Moral Orders*, with a story of her friend Winifred, a single mother living the “sweetheart” life with her common-law husband, surviving on the low wages of domestic labor in a Jamaican slum. Noting her conversion to Pentecostalism (not out of any “pagan” religion, but from an “immoral” life of temporary cohabitation with a number of partners), Austin-Broos writes that Winifred’s story as what has become a “natural course for a Jamaican woman of her circumstance.” (1997:3) From the outset, then, we know that Austin-Broos is not discounting the appeal of Pentecostalism as an “un-Jamaican”

event; something pulling Jamaicans away from cultural authenticity. Rather, her book is an explanation of how “Pentecostal practice in Jamaica has become Jamaican practice rather than a mere hegemony derived from a foreign source.” (1997:12) Through a rich theoretical framework drawn from contemporary literary theory, practice theory, discourse analysis, and cultural history, Austin-Broos explains the development of Jamaican Pentecostalism as something that cannot be captured by even the locally popular metaphors of “mixing.” In the first section (chapters 1 – 3) she notes that although Jamaicans themselves often refer to their existence as the union of “African” and “European” culture, this metaphor of Jamaicans as a mixture of two things belies the creole and creative nature of their society and, particularly, religious life. The next section (chapters 4-6) take the reader into particular elements and personalities of Pentecostal history and practice that came to the fore in light of the historical and cultural context. The final section (chapters 7-9) further fleshes out this development of Pentecostalism in regard to themes of gender, Pentecostal poetics and preaching, and marriage and morality.

Throughout the book, Austin-Broos takes full account of the complex cultural, historical, economic and political factors at work in the religious and moral lives of Jamaican Pentecostals. Too often, without this full complement of theoretical tools, the ethnographic data must be thinned out to fit the analysis into the pre-selected understanding of the researcher. But where some might see only the economic aspects of Pentecostalism (given that it is the poor of Jamaica who, like so many countries, make up the majority of Pentecostal adherents), or focus exclusively on the history of international relations, transnationalism, economic policy or racialism as the explanation of Jamaican Pentecostalism’s particularity, Austin-Broos is able to take all these along with her own ethnographic fieldwork data into the crucible of contemporary agency, cultural negotiation and macrostructural phenomena to analyze the history and current manifestation of the religion.

This is not to say that in these symbolic analyses of Pentecostalism, Austin-Broos negates the voices of the Pentecostals themselves who do, of course, relate their experiences not in terms of gender, moral politics and cultural negotiation, but in the theological language of the Spirit, salvation, grace and redemption. Indeed, what makes her ethnography laudable, from both a Christian and anthropological point of view, is the seriousness with which she takes the lives of these Christians. These are not, in her view, religious dupes who have bought a bill of goods, stripping them of cultural authenticity for the shabby garments of a foreign land. Nor are they, from everything she suggests in the book, heterodox Christians engaged in a “syncretic” Christianity. These are Christians whose faith is recognizable as the historic tradition, but in adopting Christianity, the faith was not simply “contextualized” in form; it became a significant feature of the symbolic universe of Jamaica, such that all the old questions took on new, different and unpredictable qualities.

This perspective is even more explicit in the work of Brigit Meyer and her study of Ewe Pentecostals in Ghana. Focused on a smaller context than the broad sweep of Pentecostalism throughout Jamaica, Meyer has written a deep and insightful ethnography of religious change among a West African ethnolinguistic group in Eastern Ghana, the Ewe (AY-way). The Ewe were first brought into the orbit of the expanding empires of Europe through the West African slave trade, with German Pietist missionaries arriving

some decades later. Beginning her study with the missionary era, Meyer spends the first several chapters setting out the historical narrative. In this way, she is drawn into the very obvious question of conversion, but she does not focus primarily on the questions of *why* some chose to convert, but rather under what circumstances and through what sort of discourse these conversions took place. In this she comes to the central issue of the study, the use of Christian language of God, Satan and the demonic to frame the relationship between Christianity and traditional beliefs; what she calls the “diabolization” of Ewe religion.

In looking at the early years of Ewe Christianity, Meyer covers the “vernacularization” of the faith where “a form of Christianity came into being which, albeit partly, evaded missionary control.” (1997: 82) Like Austin-Broos, she is attentive to the theological convictions of these Christians and the response they receive from both the missionaries and subsequent Christian groups throughout Ghana and transnationally. Thus she recognizes that terms such as “syncretism” do not capture the dynamics of interpretation, adaptation and localization occurring. But even in acknowledging the “orthodoxy” of these Christians, her careful linguistic and cultural study, often focused on the indigenous terms employed by the missionaries to communicate fundamental Christian notions of sin, evil, Satan and God, clearly demonstrates that translation does not equal transference.

As a way of understanding what is going on with African Christianity, Meyer’s work does what anthropology does best; she brings out the complexities on the ground that disappear at the level of the elites. Working from the historic beginnings of the religion, through the translation and diabolization of pre-Christian Ewe concepts of the world, Meyer is able to tell the story of how and why the average person understands faith, religious practice, and the multiplicity of churches arising from these missionary beginnings. For example, in exploring the development of indigenous denominations that broke away from (or grew out of) the missionary-founded Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Meyer is able to delve deeply in the local understandings of faith and the Bible, elements which proved to be the issues at stake, rather than “culture” or “Africanization” as it was being discussed among African theologians and Western elites. Indeed, she argues that in many of the movements that seem most “indigenous,” is where people have most internalized the denigration (diabolization) of indigenous practices. The fact that much of their contemporary religious life *looks* like African tradition is a consequence of an Ewe understanding of Scripture through the history and *contemporary* culture of everyday life.

It is this concern with how local cultural categories shape and are shaped by the adoption of Christian categories that forms the core of Joel Robbins’ work on the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea. The Urapmin, a distinct linguistic group of fewer than 400 members in the interior of PNG, represent an unusual and fascinating study of Christian development. In a community that was never “missionized” and had relatively little contact with Australian colonialism (i.e., there were no airstrips, trading posts, roads, or mines built near or in Urapmin territory), virtually all the members of the community have embraced a Pentecostal Christianity rooted in Baptist dispensational theology. In the 1960s, several young men travel to an adjacent linguistic group and learned from the Baptist missionaries there. They returned to teach members of their community and two key “Big Men” (a sort of local chief) adopted the new religion as a

way, Robbins argues, to engage a new, and seemingly influential, power base. However, this religion when through a radical transformation in 1977 when a Pentecostal revival swept through the region, “brought” to the Urapmin by a young student who visited a church experiencing revival on his way back home. During his three-day visit, “many” Urapmin told Robbins of being “kicked” by the Spirit and “truly converting” as they experienced something for which they had no cultural equivalent in their own, pre-Christian world.

In telling the story of the Urapmin, Robbins, like Meyer, works through the stories of conversion (Robbins employing a very helpful concept of “two-stage” conversion), and he, too, goes further to the integration of Christianity into the world of the Urapmin in subtle and complex cultural detail. Robbins presents what is surely the most original theoretical perspective of any of these books, drawing primarily on the structuralist theory of Marshall Sahlins and the concept of “value” as developed by Louis Dumont. This theory allows for a much more subtle understanding of theological development than most interpretations of non-Western Christianity have generally afforded. The Urapmin were never taught to “respect” their “local culture” by proponents of contemporary contextualization. They have not engaged foreign missionaries and denominations to develop contrasting and competing churches to decide which traditions best “fit” their local setting. Yet, with the revival of 1977 “they almost immediately came to construe their lives in the terms of a recognizably Christian culture.” (2004:2) His ensuing analysis provides immense intellectual resources for thinking about how people everywhere live with competing moral orders or competing cultural systems.

For instance, in relation to the title *Becoming Sinners*, Robbins explores the concept of personal sinfulness and how it has come to be expressed and internalized among the Urapmin. Mapping onto a previous concept of willfulness (understood as the powerful personal ability to do good or bad) and lawfulness (the system of tabu and ritual that regulated willfulness in the community), the newly Christian Urapmin were able to quickly grasp the notion of sin as the desire/will to do evil and God’s law/gospel as the control. But in an argument similar to Meyer’s point about translation, the previous notions of will and law were not conceptually isomorphic with “sin” and “Gospel.” The resulting complex of sin and salvation could not be simply substituted in the ritual and conceptual world of the Urapmin without those prior cultural categories both changing and being changed by the new Christian conceptual universe of which they were a part. This does not mean the Urapmin “misunderstood” those concepts; their articulation of sin and salvation as presented by Robbins is virtually indistinguishable from many Southern Baptist congregations in Texas or Tennessee. Rather, the social life and individual conviction that comes from the internalization of sinfulness takes on a particular local cast as it is worked out in their world. And it is the very theological familiarity of this feature that makes this ethnography so relevant to Christians everywhere. Reflecting on just this aspect of sinfulness, Robbins writes, “It is, however, one of the ingenious design features of many kinds of Christianity that they make the ever-renewed conviction of sinfulness an important condition of salvational success; as the Urapmin say, ‘Jesus came for the sinners.’” (2004: 252) Indeed, it is not only the Urapmin who say this.

It is this congruence between these Jamaican, Ghanaian and Papuan churches that make them such important and compelling works for Christians everywhere. Although

none of these anthropologists are Christian, each takes seriously the theological claims made by the practitioners and treats the religious form with respect. This seriousness and respect is perhaps more expected, but no less important for the success of the fourth book reviewed here, Marla Frederick's ethnography of Southern Black Christian women. Frederick, an anthropologist in Afro-American Studies and the Program for the Study of Religion at Harvard, is the only evangelical Christian in this collection. But while her personal knowledge and sensitivity to her "people" (she is also a Southern Black woman), shaped her analysis and gives her a voice that is notably distinct from the first three, her careful and systematic ethnography also demonstrates the power of the anthropological method to illuminate the theological and practical complexities of a Christian community.

Frederick sets out to address the very fundamental issue in contemporary cultural theory of "how institutions or structures affect people's activism or sense of agency." (2003:7) In the context of the Black church (a term Frederick problematizes for its totalizing quality), she notes that patriarchal and political structures would seem to mitigate women's agency, while racist structures and ideology in society generally constrain their lives outside the church. In order to think about how the women in her study are able to experience and perform the sort of agency they have, Frederick develops the notion of "spirituality" as an analytical category capable "motivating political action [in a way that is] connected to their everyday political and economic realities." (2003:10) This use of spirituality reflects her own nuanced understanding of faith and Christianity, in which the astute Christian reader will undoubtedly see signs of deeper knowledge, but is not reduced to "insider" language that inhibits a carefully and anthropologically rich portrait of, as the subtitle announces, "Black women and everyday struggles of faith."

In keeping with the title, Frederick elegantly goes through her ethnographic data with chapters entitled "Monday," "Tuesday," and so forth, interspersed with chapters designated "Revival." Throughout, Frederick links the interviews and ethnographic observation with particular Black Christian women to her goals of creating "a more complex understanding of religion as well as a more complex understanding of power." (2003:29)

The most compelling aspect of this book is the degree to which it takes the motivation of religion – i.e., faith – as an irreducible category. Religious people everywhere talk in terms of their faith in spirits, gods and beliefs, and their orientation towards fulfilling the expectations, desires and purposes of those beings. This is particularly true among conservative Christians such as the Black women who are the subject of Frederick's work. These women refer to the motivation of their faith and relationship with God for everything from their political activism, church involvement, sexual politics and financial priorities. By taking seriously the religious impulse, Frederick is able to bring out the complexity of how faith-based action is agentive for political resistance and acquiescence. As Frederick notes, most treatments of African-American religious traditions have focused on the manner in which churches, as institutions, or religious leaders, have been implicated in progressive and regressive politics within the African-American and wider U.S. context. What is too often lost, she argues, is a view of how individuals within these congregations interpret and practice their religious views in everyday life. Although the theoretical component of her work is at times less explicit or innovative than that of the others, Frederick's work is

anthropology at its ethnographic best; she is able to get inside a community that is generally understood through elites and institutions and, for obvious historical and sociological reasons, often resists attempts by “outsiders” to penetrate and analyze. Frederick’s position as both a member of the confessional community and a Black woman from the south gives her a unique access and sensitivity to the issues at stake. This is particularly clear in her frank and insightful discussions of sexuality and body politics among the women of her research. Frederick’s clear and reflexive writing places her within a now-widely-accepted category of the “native anthropologist” in the best sense of the term. She gives the book a personal and narrative quality that contributes to its readability.

Christians generally, but within the academy especially, have welcomed a variety social science perspectives into our intellectual world, particularly history and sociology. Anthropology, as anything more than a reference tool for missions, has been left on the shelf as either intellectually incompatible or conceptually irrelevant. But with the now-unassailable truth that non-Western Christianity is moving (or has moved?) to the center of the global Church, it is time to bring in those who have been working with concepts of culture and culture change in the non-Western world for the entire life of their discipline. (cf.:Jenkins 2002) Learning about this sea change is going to remain two-dimensional without the on-the-ground data that anthropology provides.

In recent conversations about the growth of Pentecostalism outside the West, I have heard well-educated colleagues advance theories ranging from the appeal of emotion to “the poor” to the troubling idea that non-Western people are so “mired in sin” that they “need” the signs of the Spirit more than North Americans. (What about North American Pentecostals? Don’t ask.) Yet even in the evangelical literature a lack of strong ethnographic data leads to conceptual problems. Historian and distinguished scholar of World Christianity Lamin Sanneh recently advanced a distinction between “World Christianity” over and against “Global Christianity” to distinguish between “the movement of Christianity as it takes its shape and form in societies that previously were not Christian” over against “the faithful replication of Christian forms and patterns developed in Europe.” (Sanneh 2003: 22) As these four ethnographies show, a simple distinction between “indigenous” forms and “replicated” ones does not begin to unravel the complexities of translation, adaption, adoption and integration occurring in these communities. While Sanneh’s distinction may still prove helpful, in most cases more fine-grained tools are needed.

In the same way that these ethnographies provide critical insight into the contexts they present, the anthropological conviction that studying the Other always sheds light on the Self is never more true than in the case of Christianity. Andrew Walls, a gifted and widely-read historian among Christian intellectuals, has called culture “the workplace of Christian theology.” (Walls 1996: 146) This is equally true for “our” theology as it is for “their” theology. And while there are any number of theologians who have drawn on anthropological theory to bolster their own work on nonfoundationalist or postmodern evangelical theology (e.g., Grenz and Franke 2001:chapter 5; Volf 1996), the use of secular anthropological studies of Christianity itself have not penetrated the consciousness of Christian scholarship. The number of anthropologists who have written for *First Things*, *Books & Culture*, or *Christianity Today* can be counted on one hand. Again, this is not entirely a factor of Christian disregard for the discipline – a paucity of

evangelical anthropologists working on Christianity poses a problem. But taking in the recent work of secular and Christian anthropologists working on Christian communities provides a new opportunity for understanding our faith.

I recently had the opportunity to teach a number of these texts for my advanced undergraduate students in anthropology in a course entitled *The Anthropology of Global Christianity*. Concluding with Robbins' book, students readily connected the lives of these distant others to themselves. One student wrote, "It is easy to see the similarities between the Urapmin and Wheaton College Students!" noting the individualism and sense of sinfulness worked out among the Urapmin as it is among her peers. If we are, in fact, a global Church, we would do well to embrace and encourage the fine-tuned analysis of churches around the globe. At this point, we will do no better than the four outstanding volumes here.

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¹ One exception is Elizabeth Brusco's (1995) study of Colombian evangelicals. Although she explicitly focuses on conversion, she does delve into the more developmental aspects of the religion through a focus on gender.