

BELIEF OR EXPERIENCE? THE ANTHROPOLOGIST'S DILEMMA

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Introduction

As an anthropologist who studies the religious beliefs and practices of others, I have long pondered the role that my own religious experience plays in my work, and I am similarly curious concerning the relationship between personal belief and practice and the anthropological study of religion in the work of my contemporaries. What follows is a reflection of these interests. I attempt to survey some current anthropological approaches to religion in the context of current intellectual trends, particularly in the fields of the philosophy of language, postmodernism and science, while at the same time advancing an argument for the distinctiveness of ethnographic fieldwork as a methodological tool that can give a unique and immensely valuable insight in to the nature of religion as a social fact. This rests on the premise that the embodied encounter between the anthropologist and the 'other', who becomes an object of study, combines internal experience and reflexivity in a way that has the potential for successful and honest cultural translation, through recognition of the essentially dialogical and contextual nature of knowledge.

The Politics of Religion

The Christian traditions of the University of Wales Lampeter are reflected in the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, usually led by a bishop, at the beginning of Council meetings. Although some members of Council find this explicitly Christian (Anglican) religious performance anachronistic in a modern secular university, overt dissension is rarely expressed. Prayers in public at an academic gathering proved more contentious at the annual meeting of the Association of Social Anthropologists in London, on the theme of indigenous knowledge, held in April 2000. This event provided a rare example of anthropologists reflecting on their own religious practices in front of one another. Religion as a theme at anthropological conferences is common – religion after all informs social and cultural life in all human societies and is therefore an important component of anthropological investigation and analysis. Even among anthropologists specialising in religion, however, there is no assumption that those concerned are themselves participants in a religious tradition, or lay claim to a personal spirituality. An email exchange prior to the conference concerning a potential 'religious' performance demonstrated clearly the political and religious differences that exist within a broader anthropological culture.¹ A Canadian participant, Peter Croal, asked the conference organisers whether they had 'thought of an opening and closing prayer from an indigenous person who may be at the conference?' He went on to state that 'This is quite customary here in North America at all meetings where traditional knowledge or indigenous peoples are participating. It is a sign of respect, and provides all participants with a moment to reflect and give thanks before the meetings begin'. The writer invited

comments from conference colleagues, which initiated an interesting series of reflections on the religious standpoints of various anthropologists participating in the conference, and above all highlighted the politics of religious discourse. The first response was from my colleague, Veronica Strang, who responded with the statement that she 'would be delighted to see indigenous participants comment upon this (and any other aspect of the conference)', but that she was 'very dubious indeed about the prospect of this taking the form of a prayer.' Strang, who works on Australian Aboriginal cosmologies and attitudes to the environment, went on to ask 'A prayer to whom? To whose God(s)? According to whose beliefs? To whom would we be "giving thanks"?' , continuing, 'Personally I would not care to feel roped into some kind of religiosity to which I do not subscribe, and feel this would be out of place at the ASA conference, however 'customary' it may have become in America'. She expressed the wish that colleagues would reject the suggestion, however well intentioned. A sub-text in Strang's response was that inviting indigenous participants to comment on the actual organisation of the conference would show far more respect than the artificial imposition of a form of 'religiosity' that would alienate at least some of the participants. Croal responded by saying that:

This is not about forcing people to ascribe to any particular religious belief at all. I have been at ceremonies where sweetgrass or the pipe was passed around. If one decides not to participate, it is not viewed as a negative gesture. And, I thought the noun 'prayer' may have brought some religious elements into my suggestion which is not my intent. The 'prayer' in practical or lay terms is about giving thanks and asking all the participants good health, common purpose and safe journeys. Maybe others on this list [the email list of participants] can add their understanding.

One contributor to this discussion from Florida supported Peter Croal's idea, having had experience of a prayer conducted at the opening of a conference on indigenous knowledge in 1994, prompting Strang to reiterate her question, 'giving thanks to whom?' suggesting that if any implied religious content were removed the proposal might be better received. To this Croal came up with a list of possible recipients for any thanks offered in this context, an interesting mixture of 'sacred' and 'secular', with the implication that participants could interpret such a prayer as they wished, a recitation taking the form of a litany:

Thanks to the creator ... whoever and however one perceives that to be
Thanks for clear minds, vision and strength to ensure the meeting is a success
Thanks to our family and employers for allowing us to be at the gathering
Thanks for the opportunity to share knowledge
Thanks for so many people to gather in one place to discuss an important topic
Thanks to Earth for providing life to sustain us.

At this point other participants from North America entered the field, very revealingly for an understanding of the tensions that the practice of religion in a conference setting of anthropologists exposed. Weighing in on Strang's side was Constance McCorkle, who cheered:

Here-here: I was at a[n] 'indigenous stuff' conference ... in Ottawa – where to open the thing, Native American Indians did some prayers and chants and – horror of horrors in today's North America – were allowed to smoke tobacco (in a peace pipe) in a no-smoking government building! I would very much have enjoyed having that same privilege myself, being a real sinner from way back. But it was accorded only to the 'performers' – who were also conferees. ... To me, this is not respect, but theatre! It also very much set the stage for a right-off-the-bat distancing among the ... high-level medical scientists, versus the local folks and the touchy-feely social scientists. Scientists didn't get to stand up and publicly perform one of their lab rituals, for instance. You could almost have cut the tension with a knife, and the whole conference got off to a very wobbly start. Fortunately so far, this is NOT standard practice in conferences on local knowledge, etc. in the US. In any case, whoever's ritual or prayer is represented means a lot of other peoples' are not. So forget this idea. It's a bad one. Maybe

the next trendy thing in Northern obeisance to the South will be less offensive. I'm glad to know at least one other anthropologist who recognizes that all behaviours have their proper cultural contexts.

Even more pithily, a Portuguese anthropologist asked,

Dear Colleagues

Should I and my colleagues António Medeiros, Pedro Sena and Sofia Tomaz consider ourselves 'indigenous' with a proper 'system of indigenous knowledge', coming as we do from Portugal? Are we expected to perform any obscure Catholic ceremony, and shall we bring our self-flogging equipment?

Best,

Manuel João Ramos

Although much of the debate was humorous in tone, it did touch on some sensitive issues for many anthropologists. One element is the unease at the power imbalance between the Western academics and the 'indigenous' people's whose knowledge formed the basis for the conference. In North America one might expect to have Native American participants at a conference on such a theme, whereas in Europe one is more likely to find exclusively Western trained academics interpreting the cultural knowledge of Australian Aboriginals or African hunter-gatherers. Although, as Manuel João Ramos indicated, anyone can be considered 'indigenous' to their own country and culture, the term 'indigenous' comes with a colonial baggage and images of 'them' and 'us', however highly valued 'they' and their knowledge might be.² Assumptions and stereotypes concerning the secularity of many Western academics, versus the integrated and integral role of 'religion' in the cosmologies of 'indigenous' peoples, is therefore part of an uneasy power differential. A third theme underlying these exchanges, together with the Western/Third World and Secular/Religious dichotomies, is that of science and rationality versus religion and irrationality, a topic to which I return in a later section of this paper.

Anthropologists and Belief

Anthropologists don't often reveal what they really think or believe. It is considered desirable, indeed essential, to explain one's methodological position, but anthropologists rarely reveal their own subjective standpoint in matters of religion. There is a realistic fear of being misunderstood by those who do not share a similar background or experiences, whether other academics or informants. This came over clearly in the responses to an email questionnaire I circulated to some twenty or so anthropologists who study religion. Some of these responses were as follows:

(1) A young Polish anthropologist, Ewa Klekot, a baptised but non-practising Roman Catholic who works on Christian art and symbolism, stated that while it is desirable that ethnographies should be open about spiritual or religious relationships between a fieldworker and his or her subjects, 'it is very hard to find the clear and convincing way of explaining your relationships with your subjects in the same way [as] the methodology is explained'. She admitted that she had never done so for fear of being misunderstood. She suspected that honest discussion with fieldwork subjects would only be possible with subjects who had the same level of self-consciousness (reflexivity concerning their own religious position) as the anthropologist.

(2) Natalie Tobert (who has worked as a ethnographic museum curator and latterly, medical anthropologist) responded by referring to the academic audience of anthropological texts, rather than to fieldwork subjects. She is from a secular Jewish background, and has had a

long engagement with shamanic practices in various forms. When she submitted her Masters dissertation, Tobert 'spoke a lot about reflexivity, but ... did not mention whether or not I had any personal experience'. She added 'I do not consider it is functionally useful to be open when presenting material to the academic establishment'.

(3) Another anthropologist of religion, also from a secular Jewish background, Simon Coleman, wrote his doctoral thesis on a conservative evangelical Christian group in Sweden.³ While he did not feel the need to pass comment on the rightness or otherwise of their theology, Coleman was surprised by the hostility his work aroused in others, claiming that 'everybody (academics, including most anthropologists, politicians, other Christians, journalists etc.) disliked the group I was studying intensely. That meant I was sometimes regarded as a sympathiser of the group when I didn't condemn it ... What interested me most was that fellow anthropologists were dismissive of the group – it didn't fit in with their ideas of culture'. Coleman found that he had to justify the proposition that Evangelical Christians had a culture, and they were as worthy of study as the African Dinka or Nuer.

Anthropologists are supposed to be good at practising methodological atheism, agnosticism or empathy (whatever one's preferred phenomenological term may be), and are usually interested in cultural representations rather than truth claims, but some cultures and belief systems are, it would seem from these responses, more acceptable to the anthropological community than others.

Language and Culture

It is generally accepted among practising anthropologists that however open one tries to be open to the experience of others, or however alienated from one's own society and its values, we cannot escape our own cultural baggage. High quality ethnographic data gathering and informed anthropological analysis therefore depend upon a reflexive understanding of one's own standpoint, experiences and biases, and of the ways in which these might influence our interpretation of other cultures. The fact that this reflexivity is not always achieved, and the recognition that it is part of a dialogical process between the individual ethnographer, fieldwork subjects and academic community, does not negate the goal of unbiased, honest research that does justice to those one studies.

Primacy is often accorded to language in relation to culture. As with social organisation, it both precedes and is made present through the actions of individuals. We may choose what we say, but we do so in relation to pre-existing categories, expressed within a particular language. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1974:14) observed,

Language leads us to the things themselves to the precise extent that it *is* signification before *having* a signification. If we concede language only its secondary function, it is because we presuppose the first as given, because we make language depend upon an awareness of truth when it is actually a vehicle of truth. In this way we are putting language before language.

The influential feminist commentator on gender and language, Dale Spender (1990:103), argued:

Language is *not* neutral. It is not merely a vehicle which carries ideas. It is itself a shaper of ideas, it is the programme for mental activity. In this context it is nothing short of ludicrous to conceive of human beings as capable of grasping things as they really are, of being impartial recorders of their world. For they themselves, or some of them, at least, have created or constructed that world and they have reflected themselves within it. Human beings cannot impartially describe the universe because in order to describe it they must first have a classification system, once they have a language, *they can only see certain arbitrary things*.

Just how difficult it is to be truly open to the beliefs of others and to enter into a way of seeing the world outside one's own heuristic framework (in which language plays a key role) was illustrated at another anthropological conference.⁴ The discussion had turned to questions of honesty and integrity in the fieldwork situation. An eminent member of the profession who has conducted extensive fieldwork in Papua New Guinea told the story of an a village elder under pressure to convert to Christianity, who had asked whether the anthropologist 'believed in the ancestors'. The question had considerable weight as the old man was forced to choose whether what the ancestors had taught him and his people about the afterlife, and about so many other aspects of their culture, was true or not. As an ethnographer with a great respect for the old man's culture and traditional belief system, the anthropologist would have dearly loved to reassure the old man that the ancestors were indeed real, and give him some comfort and resolve, enabling him to stand up to the missionaries who played on his fear of making a wrong choice for which he might suffer dearly (by going to hell when he died). Faced, however, with a direct question, the anthropologist felt obliged to answer 'No! I do not believe in the ancestors'.

The story ended there and we did not learn whether this anthropologist believed in Jesus, Christianity or any other religious system either. What struck me, apart from the poignancy of the account, was not the desire, common among anthropologists, to place a high value on the intrinsic worth of 'traditional' non-Western religions and the cultures of which they are a part, but the interpretation of the old man's question. The term 'believe', '*credo*' has overt Christian connotations, it is associated with heroic faith in the face of religious persecution. Terms such as 'belief' are culturally contingent and the concept conveyed may have no ready cross-cultural significance or translation. I am not a specialist in the languages or cultures of Papua New Guinea, but from my knowledge of African religions I strongly suspect that the traditional elder was not asking 'Do the ancestors exist?', 'Do the ancestors have any ontological reality?', which may have been the meaning conveyed to a native English-speaker by the term 'belief', but rather 'Are the ancestors effective?' 'Do the ancestors still have any power?' In answer to such a question I would personally have had no difficulty answering 'Yes, I believe they exist', that is, they are still effective if one believes that a certain way of seeing the world has its own logic and reality - even if I could not honestly claim to accord them external ontological being. As Durkheim (who thought of himself as an atheist) put it, 'we admit that ... religious beliefs rest upon a scientific experience whose demonstrative value is, in one sense, not one bit inferior to that of scientific experiments, though different from them' (1976:417).

The Dutch ethnographer of the Cameroon grassfields, Robert Pool (1994), demonstrated just how slippery both Western medical and indigenous terms can be. What started out as an apparently straightforward attempt to discover why an area with sufficient food suffered from high levels of infant malnutrition, turned into a linguistic detective story, revealing layer after layer of cultural understanding. Kinship relations, social practices and above all witchcraft beliefs came into focus as Pool and his assistant searched for translations of Western bio-medical terms and sought to understand their indigenous meanings. Not only were indigenous terms loaded with cultural significance, far beyond any Western equivalent, but they also proved highly idiomatic, and their 'discovery' and explanation as dependent upon the dialogue with the anthropologists as upon any firmly fixed areas of cultural agreement. Wittgenstein (1953) developed the notion of a 'language game' to emphasise the construction of reality as language is lived out in speech, as opposed to seeing it as a given to be received and passed on passively. The fluidity, rather than arbitrariness, of signs and signifiers concerning health and disease, morality and human relations, is evident in Pool's choice of narrative style. This fascinating study points not to the triumph of an

extreme post-modernist view of language and culture, in which all reality might be regarded as relative, contingent and therefore ultimately ephemeral,⁵ but to the complexity of language and its embeddedness in culture. It asserts the creativity of human beings, who simultaneously draw upon a reservoir of cultural understanding, while creatively transforming language and culture (including religious beliefs and practices) as they live out its performance.

Experience

If language and culture limit the extent to which we can be open, empathetic interpreters of another culture, what of experience? Anthropology claims a distinctive if not unique methodology, participant observation. The discipline of (social and cultural) anthropology can be defined as a comparative study of human life. Anthropologists are convinced that reliable data concerning human society can best be gathered by becoming part of that society. The ethnographer seeks to immerse him or herself in alternative cultural and belief systems, taking part in rituals, learning the language and etiquette of another culture or social group, gathering data on social forms and institutions and adopting as far as possible and appropriate the *habitus* or bodily techniques characteristic of the host society. What at first appears strange or incomprehensible gradually begins to seem normal and natural – enabling the ethnographer to reflect on his or her pre-existing suppositions and common sense notions – the process of making the familiar strange. The encounter between the culture of the ethnographer and fieldwork subjects, as well as a wider comparison between diverse cultures and societies, is a key component of the anthropological method, earning it the epithet ‘comparative sociology’.

Fieldwork is often described as a rite of passage, following Arnold van Gennep’s (1960) three-fold classification of transition rituals into the phases of separation, transition and incorporation. The neophyte leaves the safety of the university library for the rigours of the field, becomes absorbed, to a greater or lesser extent, into alternative ways of thinking and seeing the world, before returning triumphantly with field notes, photos, videos and tape recordings, ready for the transformation of data into the text that will in turn provide the entry ticket into the profession of anthropologist. The key fact concerning the information which is then worked over and interpreted for an academic audience is that it represents a lived experience. The field notes have the power to evoke the sights, smells, sounds and above all emotions that accompanied the recording of genealogies, crop rotation or conversations.⁶ Theories that might have seemed startlingly relevant and convincing in the comfort of the university seminar are measured against the ‘reality’ of lived experience in the field. One of anthropology’s key methodological strengths is this potential to put theories to the test in an empirical setting, not as an occasional experiment but as the very condition for their acceptance. Michael Jackson (1996:4) expresses the groundedness of anthropological theorising when he states that: ‘Fieldwork brings home to us the ontological priority of social existence, and fieldwork-based writing affirms that truth must not be seen as an unmasking which eclipses the appearance of the thing unmasked, but as form of disclosure which does it justice’. The ethnographer is usually profoundly challenged and often changed by the encounter with the ‘other’, although may only come to terms with how much he or she has changed, and the significance of these transformations, on the return home, when faced with former ways of thinking and being. Studying the religion of others has a particular power to challenge conceptual frameworks, however partially we succeed in entering into alternative worlds.

Most anthropologists no longer regard ethnography as a neutral record of other societies (if indeed they ever did – former generations of anthropologists were usually far more nuanced in their understanding of the dialogical nature of field research than some proponents of a post-modern anthropology give them credit for). Ethnography is based on a dialectical relationship between the observer and the observed. When trying to understand witchcraft beliefs and practices in Cameroon I may never have shared the experiences of my informants, nor felt their fear in the face of a witchcraft attack or accusation. On the other hand I cannot conceive of morality or of the relationship between the mind and body in the same way as before. If an apparently healthy young man is brought into a mission hospital claiming that he will die because he has been bewitched, and subsequently dies, I do not necessarily conclude that a witch has eaten his life force in the spirit world, but I do wonder at the power the mind and emotions can exert over the body. If I claim to believe, as I do, in the power of prayer to positively affect the health and well-being of those I love, I cannot (logically) totally dismiss the possibility of a commensurate debilitating power. Jeanne Favret-Saada (1980), who studied witchcraft accusations in rural Normandy in the 1970s concluded that witchcraft existed even if witches did not. For those who believed themselves bewitched and who became caught up in the world of accusations, counter-accusations and ‘unwitchers’, witchcraft was a real and potent facet of daily existence. Anthropological interpretations of witchcraft as a remedial institution or metaphor for social relations did not diminish the power of witchcraft as a powerful force in people’s lives. It became the lens through which the peasant farmers viewed the world and ordered and interpreted relationships with kin and neighbours. Among the Bangwa of Cameroon, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa, everyone is an actual or potential witch. Even without the actual maleficence of one’s neighbours, the power exerted by a discourse of witchcraft, and belief that one is a victim, can be literally unbearable.

Language, bodily experience, emotions and contiguity in time and space can all act as bridges between individuals and cultures, but cannot enable us to claim to ‘know the other’. I am more likely to empathise with the feelings of my own child than with those of a stranger. I may recognise grief, but still find it easier to interpret the signs of mourning of a widow in Britain who has lost her life time’s partner, than the behaviour of a Bangwa woman in Cameroon, who may have been the junior wife of a chief whose social life centred around her children and co-wives. But I can also be mistaken. I depend on powers of imagination and empathy, as well as my knowledge of the context and social relations of those involved. As in any relationship, the ability to interpret the cultural signals of those with whom one lives is a process, we may become more proficient but the other is never fixed, totally predictable or absorbed into oneself. Michael Jackson has emphasised the importance of personal experience in being able to at least reach out to and empathise with others. If we are not to imagine ourselves as isolated entities, we have to assume a level of common humanity – what Jackson refers to as the ‘paradox of human existence – that one can be in the world only if one feels that one’s own world is, in some significant sense, also *the world*’. He continues (1998:15):

... it is irrelevant whether the psychic unity of humankind is proven scientifically or accepted on ideological grounds because it is existentially imperative. Human sameness everywhere consists in similar differences ... Such a notion of the singular universal grounds the practical possibility of crossing cultural boundaries, and doing anthropological fieldwork.

What we have experienced, consciously or unconsciously, verbally and non-verbally, becomes the raw material for interpretation of a culture, together with our observations and the interpretations members of a culture give us in turn of their own experiences.⁷ The anthropologist aims to grasp a far more complex reality than that presented by an ostensibly

straightforward or objective interview transcript or the results of a questionnaire survey. As James Fernandez puts it (1986:164):

The ethnography of a social situation requires, as we now well recognize in anthropology, that we go much beyond the given language information. Giving primacy to the imagination, I wish to refer to this ongoing interaction as the 'argument of images' that lie behind and accompany behavior. Some of these images have their source in language; many of them do not.

While much could be said on the nature of experience and of experiences (as heightened semantic moments) and of their expression and codification, I will instead turn once again to the 'dilemma' of the anthropologist studying religion, and look at some of the ways in which new cultural experiences impact on the individual.

Interpreting Experience

When our view of the world is challenged we can react in a number of ways. First of all, new information can be absorbed into an expanded or modified cosmology on a temporary or more permanent basis. Secondly, former ways of thinking and being can be comprehensively rejected in favour of 'going native' - in reality, as when an ethnographer adopts the language, customs and social networks the people he or she studies, or in an imaginative reconstruction of a supposed reality ('playing Indian'). A third possibility is to firmly reject novel ideas and experiences and to erect barriers around and reinforce a pre-existing mindset.⁸ All three reactions are apparent in the published works of anthropologists of religion, and I will give brief examples of each, although the distinctions between these reactions are seldom as sharply drawn as I have suggested above.

(1) Modifying a cosmology (temporarily or permanently) to fit new dimensions of knowledge and experience

James Clifton (1992) had spent a year studying Kansas Potawatomi 'Dream Dance' rites when he heard of an infamous Indian wizard, Swoops Down, and although warned off him, curiosity got the better of the day and Clifton arranged to meet him. After being kept waiting for much of the day the young anthropologist and old Indian finally met and for a moment held each other's eyes:

Suddenly this huge snarling Eagle drove out of the sun at me, sharp open beak thrusting at my face, talons slashing at my eyes! I was hit by a massive adrenaline rush. Heart pounding I leaped back, fell ass-over-teakettle on top of the milk box, hit the dirt hard (p. 42).

Clifton's first reaction was to take cover or find a weapon to protect himself from the eagle's attack but,

What eagle? Heart still thumping I looked up half fearfully, protecting my face with one arm. There was no eagle. That miserable sorcerer was standing there perfectly relaxed, arms at his side, the hint of a sneer on pursed lips, glancing at me contemptuously with a glint of satisfied malice in his eyes (ibid.).

Reflecting on this incident later, Clifton could reason that the old man had heard that he had been stumbling around for weeks looking for a sorcerer, and that the performance was well planned. 'When Clifton the Gullible arrived, he'd out silenced me, stalled until I was nervous, dehydrated, suggestible, half-broiled, and more than half-blinded by the sun. Then Swoops Down pounced on his prey' (p. 43). Clifton's final assessment of his experience was that the old Indian was 'a man of impressive deeds but few words' who had 'delivered up a vivid, terrifying sampling of his repertoire' (ibid.). While he did not conclude that Swoops Down had metamorphosed into an eagle, the message delivered to his senses at the moment of encounter, he was left in no doubt of the wizard's power to alter perceptions of reality.

The ethnographic record is replete with similar accounts of anthropologists attempting to rationalise experiences *post facto*, experiences that at the time posed a profound challenge to their way of understanding the world and of interpreting experience. There are degrees of accommodation. Some experiences can be fitted into an existing conceptual framework by simply expanding the boundaries of what is understood as possible by science, psychology, or the religious faith of the ethnographer. When Jeanne Favret-Saada became drawn into the world of witches and 'unwitchers' in Normandy she realised that it was because she had been cast by her hosts in the role of an 'unwitcher', albeit a not very powerful one. When perceived as a dispassionate ethnographer asking scientific questions, the discourse of witchcraft had remained firmly closed to her, but as an active participant in this discourse – a role initiated by events and by the family with whom she lived, an alternative cosmology was gradually revealed. While Favret-Saada (1980, 1989) also sought training with an established 'unwitcher', and was convinced of the 'reality' of the phenomenon for the people among whom she lived, she remained faithful to her scientific training. When it came to interpreting and writing her material for an academic audience, witchcraft was described as a 'remedial institution' that helped individuals who inherited the family property to take control of it, despite the fact that this usually involved disinheriting siblings.

(2) *Going native*

In John Messenger's (1992) delightful account of his acquaintance with an Irish *leipreachan*, known affectionately as Brendan, Messenger and his wife appear not only to have appropriated the ways of seeing of their hosts, but to have maintained this vision on their re-entry into American academic life. Messenger claims that although the locals spoke little of fairies, referring to them respectfully as the 'gentry' or 'good people', they never the less played an important role in people's lives. In respect of the Messenger's own encounter with a *leipreachan* John Messenger wrote,

... during our stay on the island we came to feel the immaterial presence of this creature so intensely and to anticipate his pranks with such enthusiasm that we eventually came to view him as a third member of our family, well deserving an affectionate and suitable name (p. 199).

Brendan's favourite trick was opening bolted and shuttered doors and windows at night, although they hypothesised that he may also have been responsible for violin music emanating from beneath the eaves of an elderly neighbour's house. On returning to the United States at the end of their period of fieldwork, the Messengers were delighted to find that Brendan had followed them across the Atlantic, adding to his repertoire by switching on lights, manipulating the heating thermostat, running baths, turning off the alarm clock in the night but thoughtfully waking one or other of its owners when it was due to go off, as well as developing a taste for Irish whisky.

Messenger took to giving his comparative religion students a weekly update on Brendan's doings, and mused that he might have won some converts to a belief in fairies by the 'sheer enthusiasm and obvious honesty of my own convictions' (p. 204), but found that his colleagues were far from convinced, commenting that (*ibid.*):

Anthropologists are a tough-minded lot who espouse cultural relativism, naturalism, and the other 'isms' that humanists and theologians find so repugnant. The customary attitude of the fieldworker toward what his subjects interpret as supernatural events is one of extreme skepticism (*sic*) or active disbelief. There are some anthropologists, however, who at least maintain an open mind where these phenomena are concerned ... Having been able to determine to our own satisfaction the naturalistic cause of these occurrences [supra-natural events in Nigeria as well as in Ireland], we have always been willing to consider the reality of the supernatural, but with something less than open minds. This tender-minded attitude is regarded as poison oak in the more scientific groves of academe.

The Messengers are not alone in choosing to modify or reject previous scientific assumptions as to how the world works. While the light-hearted tone of Messenger's writing allows the possibility that he might be pulling one's leg, despite assertions to the contrary, the same cannot be said of Paul Stoller (1989:227), who wrote of his experiences with Songhay sorcerers in Niger:

The Songhay world challenged the basic premises of my scientific training. Living in Songhay forced me to confront the limitations of the Western philosophical tradition. My seventeen-year association with Songhay reflects the slow evolution of my thought, a thought profoundly influenced by Songhay categories and Songhay wisdom.

By seeking initiation as a sorcerer, Stoller not only gained ethnographic data on Songhay sorcery but, as has happened to other ethnographers, (although not invariably) came to believe both in his own occult powers and in his vulnerability to the malefice of others.⁹ He finally fled from Niger, when he believed that a sorcerer he had inadvertently angered many years before would use her occult powers to harm him (and his co-author, Cheryl Olkes). Like Favret-Saada, Stoller discovered that there is no neutral position from which to participate or observe the occult. By entering into that world he inevitably became positioned within it, and had to bear the consequences of acting like, and being considered by others, a sorcerer.

(3) Reassertion of a Western scientific paradigm

Despite critiques of science and of its suitability as a tool for ethnographic research,¹⁰ most ethnographers recognise that data can be of varying quality, of greater or lesser accuracy. Ethnographers differ in the extent of their aspirations to objectivity or commitment to reflexivity as part of their effort at honest description and interpretation. While so-called scientific and interpretative approaches to anthropology are often portrayed as opposed, the differences can be more of style and subject matter than substance. Good science and good interpretation both involve an awareness of context, including the subjective role of the ethnographer, and an ability to grasp the given's of another culture, which is then expressed in a way that others, usually readers of an ethnographic text, can grasp. One of the problems for anthropologists espousing strictly scientific methods and approaches is the exclusion of much of human experience from the purview of anthropology. A rather arbitrary line must be drawn around experiences that can be verified or falsified, which can contribute to scientific knowledge, and areas of life that are defined as metaphysical or ethical and therefore beyond the scope of (scientific) anthropological enquiry.¹¹ While some of those who define themselves as scientific anthropologists are content to simply skirt around areas of knowledge and experience that are not amenable to western science, others are more strident in their dismissal of all metaphysical claims, turning science itself into a weapon to defend the individual from any threat to their view of the world. One representative of this so-called scientific approach is James Lett (1997), who attempts to demolish the claims, or as he would see it, pretensions, of interpretative and post-modern ethnographic writing, which he regards as a betrayal of anthropology as a science of society. Lett argues that the exclusion of religion from scientific scrutiny is both unwarranted and objectionable. According to Lett, 'Considerations of disciplinary integrity, public welfare, and human dignity demand that religious claims be subjected to anthropological evaluation' (1997:104). Lett defines science by its rationality, and religion by its irrationality, contending that 'anthropologists have an intellectual and ethical obligation to investigate the truth or falsity of religious beliefs' (p. 105). Having set the terms of the debate, with the fervour of a true believer, Lett summarises his argument by stating:

We know that no religious belief is true because we know that all religious beliefs are either nonfalsifiable or falsified. In the interests of scientific integrity, we have an obligation to declare that knowledge. Doing so, of course, would not preclude other anthropological analyses of religion, and I would not want to be understood as having suggested that we should abandon the study of the social, psychological, ecological, symbolic, aesthetic, and ethical functions and dimensions of religion ... Nevertheless, the scientific study of religion will never be fully legitimate until scientists recognize and proclaim the truth about religion (p. 116).

Lett's personal experiences, religious or otherwise, are not disclosed, but it is not hard to imagine that as for all scholars, our personal biography, culture and language provide the filter through which the world is perceived. While not dismissing all non-scientific studies of religion, Lett is also clear of his priorities and of the relative value of a 'scientific' as opposed to a social, symbolic, ethical or any other approach to religion. One of the key problems with Lett's 'scientific' anthropology is that he has reached his universally applicable conclusions *a priori*, simply by the way he defined the terms of the debate. If religion is irrational belief, and therefore non-scientific, there seems little point expending time and energy proclaiming this point. To suggest that it is somehow a matter of public interest to prove this irrationality bespeaks a personal rather than purely scientific agenda. It certainly gets us no nearer to an understanding of what religion is and does, what it means and how it is performed and transmitted by those who practice it. Neither does it give interpretative space to the personal experiences described by the ethnographer and his or her informants as supernatural, religious or metaphysical.

The Anthropologist's Dilemma

For most anthropologists of religion proving or disproving the logical truth of religion is not an issue, whatever their personal beliefs or experiences. Although seldom acknowledged directly, Husserl's pupil, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is a more significant influence on anthropological theory and methodology than logical positivism. For Merleau-Ponty a phenomenological approach to religion, or to any other social phenomenon, does not just involve bracketing out the truth or falsity of a statement, but recognising that we can only perceive the world as embodied subject within it. The conscious mind or *cogito* is not a neutral observer, but a subject in dialogue with other subjects, or as Merleau-Ponty expressed it (1982:570):

It is precisely my body which perceives the other's body and finds there something like a miraculous prolongation of our own intentions ... Henceforth, just as the parts of my body jointly form a system, the other's body and mine are a single whole, the face and the reverse of sole phenomenon ...¹²

Ethnography consists of a dialectic between self and 'other'. There are three movements, the encounter with the self, the 'I' who engages in dialogue, the encounter with the 'other' and finally the attempt to interpret the 'other', both to oneself and to a (usually) different 'other'. Belief and experience are not opposed categories but part of who we are and how we act in the world. I do not believe that scientific honesty – being open to correction, commitment to accurate representation and to the development of theories and methods that do justice to the data - is necessarily at odds with a clearly stated ethical, moral or metaphysical view of the world. Hans-Georg Gadamer, who helped shape the turn to a literary 'post-modern' analysis of society, also urged a rapprochement between what are essentially humanistic and scientific ways of understanding and interpreting the world. He wrote (1966:3-4), 'Language is the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in-the-

world, and the all-embracing form of the constitution of the world' but went on to say, 'hence we always have in view the pronouncements of the sciences, which are fixed in nonverbal signs'. Gadamer aimed to 'reconnect the objective world of technology, which the sciences place at our disposal and discretion, with those fundamental orders of being that are neither arbitrary nor manipulable by us, but rather simply demand our respect'.

Gadamer borrowed the term 'hermeneutics' from Heidegger to refer to a method of judgement based on the relevance of the data to the reader: 'What we reject has nothing to say to us – or we reject it because it has nothing to say to us' (1996:4). This is close to Dilthey's (1976:210) observation that the past only has meaning for us when we bring it into a relationship with the present.¹³ Or, as Edward Bruner (1986:12) summarises it, 'Cultural transmission is not simply a replication of an old original, a mechanical transfer of the cultural heritage from generation to generation ... Culture is alive, context sensitive, and emergent'. It would seem then, that we cannot ignore the self, our own experience and our internal dialogue with our own culture and history, or with those of others, if we wish to interpret human society.

Paul Ricoeur, despite being closely associated with the post-modern emphasis on textuality, tried to use the metaphor and methods of textual study to add depth to, rather than jettison, the scope of human action amenable to scientific enquiry. In an article entitled 'The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text' written in 1971, he stated that (1991:151):

My claim is that action itself, action as meaningful, may become an object of science, without losing its character of meaningfulness, through a kind of objectification similar to the fixation that occurs in writing. By this objectification, action is no longer a transaction to which the discourse of action would still belong. It constitutes a delineated pattern that has to be interpreted according to its inner connection.

I have framed this article as a dilemma, or discourse between belief and experience. In practice this dichotomy can be interpreted as a tension between personal faith, ways of interpreting novel experiences, and a commitment to scientific objectivity. As the examples from Gadamer and Ricoeur indicate, what are broadly referred to as post-modern interpretations are not necessarily anti-science, but rather seek to plumb depths of human experience and the human spirit that scientific methods are unable to accommodate. Ricoeur makes the useful distinction for ethnographers between shared feelings and thought processes, which may be neither useful nor possible for an outsider, and the ability to understand and disclose an alternative world view (1994:167):

As the model of text interpretation shows, understanding has nothing to do with an *immediate* grasping of foreign psychic life or with an *emotional* identification with a mental intention. Understanding is entirely *mediated* by the whole of explanatory procedures that preceded it and accompany it. The counterpart of this personal appropriation is not something that can be *felt*, it is the dynamic meaning released by the explanation...with reference to the text, that is, its power of disclosing the world.

While it is not possible to do justice to Ricoeur's argument for the suitability of textual analysis for social action here, it is worth noting that the hermeneutical methods espoused by Gadamer and Ricoeur among others, have had a considerable influence on a generation of social and cultural anthropologists. Clifford Geertz, often thought of as the father of modern interpretative anthropology, has taken over both the language of hermeneutics and the search for a meaningful disclosure of other worlds from these thinkers. He was not so much wary of scientific methodology as applied to anthropology, but aware of its limitations

when undertaking such a complex task as attempting to study human cultures and societies from the inside. Geertz coined the phrase 'thick description' to capture the quality of interpretation necessary if we are to make sense of our ethnographic data (1993:16):

The claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author's ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement – what manner of men are these? – to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise. This raises some serious problems of verification, all right – or, if 'verification' is too strong a word for so soft a science (I myself, would prefer 'appraisal'), of how you can tell a better account from a worse one. But that is precisely the virtue of it. If ethnography is thick description and ethnographers those who are doing the describing, then the determining question for any given example of it, whether a field journal squib or a Malinowski-sized monograph, is whether it sorts winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones. It is not against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned descriptions, that we must measure the cogency of our explications, but against the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers. It is not worth it, as Thoreau said, to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar.

We are enmeshed in language and other aspects of culture, but can also transcend them. They precede us but as we speak and enact our culture they are performed in and through us. They can separate us from others but also have the power to unite us. As Merleau-Ponty (1974:17) said of language, 'He who speaks enters into a system of relations which presupposes his presence and at the same time makes him open and vulnerable'. If anthropology and anthropologists have anything to contribute to the study of religion I would suggest that it is born of this vulnerability – a willingness to enter into new worlds and return to share the experience with others. While any particular form of belief is not a prerequisite to this form of vulnerability, the desire to communicate with, and experience the 'other' is. Anthropological methodology offers the possibility of personal, embodied encounters with the 'other' – with living as well as written texts, and challenges the ethnographer to include embodied experience as part of the theoretical and analytical matrix of interpretation. This is not an appeal to a narcissistic fixation on the self or a claim that good ethnography differs little from an imaginary or largely fictitious but lively and compelling account of a culture or society. A willingness to use the self as a research tool and an acknowledgement of the role and complexity of the multiple dialogues involved in ethnographic work and in anthropological interpretations does, however, constitute a valuable resource for an honest, scientific interpretation of religion, culture and social life.

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NOTES

1. I am indebted to Veronica Strang for drawing my attention to this debate. This paper was first delivered at the Alister Hardy Society Members Day in Oxford, November 2000. It is available on cassette from the Alister Hardy Society for the Study of Spiritual Experience. A revised version of the paper was delivered to the Anthropology research seminar in the University of Wales Lampeter in Lent Term 2001. I am grateful to colleagues and students for their perceptive and constructive comments.
2. In practice the term 'indigenous' is seldom clearly defined, although there is an unstated continuum from those peoples' with the simplest technologies (such as Khoisan peoples in South Africa or Malay Pygmies) to peasant cultures or countries simply further away from Europe, to those on our borders or in our midst who are not part of the dominant group (such as Gypsies, or perhaps hill farmers with quaint customs). Although anthropologists are as likely to study the workings of the European Commission, Japanese business culture or drug addicts in European cities as people in 'simpler societies' (finding politically correct terms is always sensitive), the latter are unlikely to find their views represented as 'indigenous knowledge'.
3. Published as *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
4. The biannual conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists held in Krakow, Poland in July 2000.
5. The unreality, or 'hyperreality' of existence is the logical conclusion to which the postmodernist scholar Jacques Baudrillard (1983, 1994) has taken the view that nothing objective can be salvaged beyond the multiple readings of a text. This extreme deconstruction of 'reality' potentially undermines any attempt to describe and interpret the 'other', and has led many anthropologists to reaffirm the validity and actuality of culture and experience as something both observable and at the same time dynamic and dialogical (cf. Brian Morris (2000:13): '... like social phenomena, cultural forms, though actual entities, must not be conceived as 'thing like' ... But rather must be viewed as a process. Cultural representations thus come into being; they are relatively enduring (have duration), they have a certain coherence (unity); they have causal efficacy; they are open systems with conditions of existence (human social life); and they perish – just like people and elephants and everything else in the world'.
6. Cf. Merleau-Ponty (1974:26), 'It always appears to us that the operations of experience codified in our language follow the very articulations of being, because it is through them that we relate to being.'

7. See Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Writings* (1976). Dilthey's writings on ritual and performance, the relationship between experience and its interpretation and between the cognitive and somatic elements of experience have influenced many anthropologists of the so-called 'interpretative' (or neo-Kantian) school.
8. Cf. Mary Douglas' (1996:38ff) discussion of public categories and the ways in which societies deal with the anomalies.
9. Eric de Rosny (1985), a Jesuit priest working in Douala, Cameroon, succeeded in training as an *nganga* (sometimes translated as 'native doctor' or in older texts, 'witch doctor') without sacrificing either his Christian faith and ethics or his respect for the *ngangas* who befriended and guided him. He was convinced of the reality of their powers, but found it possible to accommodate this perception into a Roman Catholic view of the world.
10. See for instance many of the contributions to James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.) (1986) and Peter Pels and Lorraine Nancel (eds.) (1991).
11. The position taken by Lawrence Kuznar (1997).
12. Merleau-Ponty, cited in Spiegleberg (1982:570).
13. Quoted in Turner (1986:36)

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