

Anthropology, Missions and Epistemological Shifts

Darrell Whiteman and
Chuck VanEngen eds.

Orbis Books
November 2007

*Sent Aug 12 to
Darrell Whiteman*
*Hand Copy Sent
Aug 28, 06 Whiteman*

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Anthropologists and missiologists are embedded in human contexts. It should not surprise us, therefore, that they are deeply shaped by the cultures and worldviews in which they live. This is particularly true, because both anthropology and Western protestant mission movements have are, to a considerable extent, the children of the Enlightenment and modernity. To understand the history of anthropological and missiological theories, it is helpful to examine not only the interaction between them, but also the fundamental epistemological shifts that have been taking place with the emergence of postmodernity, and now post-postmodernity (Hiebert 1999).

Modernity

With the coming of modernity, science became the dominant form of creating human knowledge. The epistemological foundation was Positivism. The focus of this is to discover Truth that is universal and timeless by means of empirical observation and the use of Greek abstract algorithmic logic and digital sets. The British anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown wrote,

The postulate of the inductive method is that all phenomena are subject to natural law, and that consequently it is possible, by the application of certain logical methods, to discover and prove certain general laws, i.e. certain general statements or formulae, of greater or lesser degree of generality, each of which applies to a certain range of facts or events. . . . For social anthropology the task is to formulate and validate statements about the conditions of existence of social systems (laws of social statics) and the regularities that are observable in social change (laws of social dynamics) (1958: 7, 128).”

Positivism holds that our scientific knowledge is an accurate, true photograph of the world, and corresponds one-to-one with reality. Its theories are not models, but facts. Scientists

seek objective truth, and to achieve this they must eliminate feelings and morals from the rational/empirical processes because these introduce subjectivity. Scientific knowledge is seen as universal and timeless. It is true for everyone everywhere.

Positivism dominated anthropological theories until the 1930s. Anthropologists, such as E. B. Tylor, James Frazer and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, saw anthropology as a science, and modeled their research after the natural sciences. They believed their theories of social organization were timeless and universal—they applied to all peoples down through history. The beliefs of the people they studied were primitive and need not be taken into account. The people needed to be educated in the truth, namely modern sciences.

Positivism deeply shaped Western theology. Theological Positivism holds that our central concern is truth, and that our theology corresponds one-to-one to Scripture. Other theologies and religions are false and must be attacked. We are concerned with truth and define it in rational terms. We divorce it from feelings and values, because these undermine the objectivity of the truth. Our concern is that people believe the Gospel truth, because that determines whether or not they are saved. We defined the truth in propositional terms, and seek to transmit it unchanged. We see ourselves as God's lawyers, and put our trust in experts who have studied Scripture deeply. We see the Gospel as acultural and ahistorical. It is unchanging and universal, can be codified in abstract rational terms, and communicated in all languages without loss of meaning. Neither the sociocultural contexts of the listeners nor the messengers need be taken into account. We also see the Gospel as acultural and ahistorical. It is unchanging and universal, and can be communicated in all languages without loss of meaning. Neither the sociocultural contexts of the listeners nor the messengers need be taken into account.

Underlying this theological search for truth was a belief that human rationality is based on universal laws of thought. True logic, it was thought, is transcultural and ahistorical. Its model is mathematics with the precise presuppositions and abstract, algorithmic deductions. In such a logical system the exact nature of the facts and reason are necessary to construct a true theory. A single error in either calls the whole system into question. Knowledge must be accurate in every detail for the whole to be true.

The goal of Positivist systematic theology is to present a single, unified picture of truth that is self contained, potentially exhaustive and logically consistent. Biblical history is the data on which they build their theology, but they seek more than a theology that looks for truth in the context of history. They are looking for the unchanging verities that underlie reality.

Positivism deeply shaped the modern mission movement. As Positivists we equate the Gospel with our Christianity. We have the timeless eternal truth, and it must be communicated without distortion to other peoples. Moreover, our Christianity gave rise to modern civilization. Charles Taber notes,

The superiority of Western civilization is the culmination of human development, the attribution of that superiority to the prolonged dominance of Christianity, the duty of Christian to share civilization and the gospel with the “benighted heathen”—these were the chief intellectual currency of their lives (1991, 71).

It was important, therefore, that new converts learn from us and our ways because we are Christians and this is the way we practice it. They should become Christians and Civilized humans. There is little need for contextualization other than to translate the Bible as literally as possible into other languages. Missionaries built schools and hospitals alongside churches, and taught science as an essential part of the curriculum along with the Gospel. In many parts of the

world Christianity became equated with Western Civilization and commerce, and the reshaping of the entire world in the image of “modernity” was a foregone conclusion.

An example of this view is the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka. In 1841, Spencer Hardy, a Methodist missionary, wrote:

The national religion of Ceylon is Buddhism, accompanied by the worship of demons and the propitiation of malignant infernal spirits. . . . I rest my argument for the necessity of its destruction upon the simple fact that it is opposed to the truth— denies the existence of God— is ignorant of the only way of salvation, by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ— and is utterly impotent as a teacher of morals, or as a messenger of peace to the awakened consciences of its deluded votaries (1841, 9).

Assessing the results of this view, W. T. J. Small wrote,

. . . there was no attempt to adapt the form of worship to a national or truly Sinhala form. . . . Sinhala renderings of the great Methodist hymns were produced and sung to Western tunes, to the accompaniment of an organ or harmonium; the few lyrics included in the hymn book were hardly used in the services inside the church, and were reserved for open air services. No one dared to play an eastern musical instrument or a drum in a Methodist church in Ceylon. In short, a visitor from the West entering one of our churches during this period would find nothing to suggest to him in the ritual music or appointments that was in an eastern church (Small 1971: 367).

K. M. De Silva writes,

The Christian missions had come to Sri Lanka as the apostles of a new faith and as critics of indigenous society, and in preaching their new ideas the missionaries had been fortified usually by an unquestioning faith no merely in their own rightness but also in the intrinsic depravity of many traditional customs and beliefs. This latter had given the Christian missionary movement its characteristic feature of cultural intolerance. . . . Christianity was interpreted on western lines and in non-indigenous concepts. The missionaries imposed on their adherents in Sri Lanka the conventional forms of western Christianity almost in their entirety (1977, 395).

This view was not restricted to Methodists, nor to missionaries in Sri Lanka. It was characteristic of most Protestant missions around the world.

Post-modern Deconstruction

The privileged position scientists claimed for their knowledge was challenged by philosophers of science such as Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, and Paul Feyerabend. They studied scientists at work and found that they were deeply shaped by their cultures, and that they were part of the pictures they were studying. Scientists were not objective outsiders, but passionate, moralizing insiders for whom knowledge was not only about truth but also about power.

Anthologists and missionaries were among the first to challenge Positivism. As they studied other peoples and their cultures deeply, they began to see the world through the people's eyes, not their own. This shift led to the distinction between etic points of view—those the scientist brings with her, and emic points of view, the way the people see realities.

Anthropologists continued to formulate broad general etic theories, but increasingly their focus was on in-depth, emic ethnographies that tried to help us see the world as other people see it.

The tension between etic and emic points of view raised difficult questions. Whose questions, categories and theories should we use for comparisons between them? Which of these is 'true,' and why is it truer than another? Now we are no longer comparing 'facts' in different cultures, we are comparing different ways of looking at the facts. It is arrogant to claim that etic theories are superior to the emic understandings of the people, but without comparison between different emic views, there is no way to formulate general theories about humans. All we are left with is many different cultural worlds, none of which can judge another. The result was cultural relativism, which came to dominate anthropological theories after the 1930s.

Cultural relativism raised a profound question: can people from different cultures ever truly understand one another. Modernity assumed that all people lived in the same world. They

simply attached different labels to the same realities. Postmodernity argued that people live in totally different conceptual worlds. How then can they communicate or understand one another? One answer was that the bridge between cultures is that all humans have the same minds and think in the same ways. This assumes universal rationality common to all people that provide the bridgehead into other cultures. Further research, however, showed not only do people create different categories and do so in different ways, but that they have different logics, none of which is privileged and correct. The Positivist assumptions of science itself were challenged and it, too, lost its privileged position. It became one set of belief systems over against other belief systems such as religions and animism.

To see anthropologists and missionaries as humans deeply involved in the scenes they study, and bringing with them the unexamined assumptions and worldviews of their own cultures led to a new epistemology, namely Instrumentalism. This holds that all people see their worlds through their own cultural eyes, and that they cannot judge other cultures, claiming that their own is truer or better. The only judgements that can be made are based on pragmatics. This culture can produce more food than others, that culture develops stronger families than others. The result is cultural relativism.

The critique of modern Positivist anthropology began in the 1930s, but the implications of postmodernity continue to be worked out even today. Some, like Clifford Geertz, argue that anthropology is not a science, but belongs to the humanities. It is dealing not with lifeless objects subject to impersonal laws. It looks at humans who are living beings beyond the range of mechanistic analysis. To understand them we need hermeneutics, not simply observation and testing.

Other anthropologists argue for a radical cultural relativism. Each culture is autonomous and whole, and there are no criteria for judging between them. We can only seek to mutually understand one another across cultural boundaries. They argue that we cannot develop general theories from detached points of view, that we can never really begin to understand another culture, and that in research, anthropologists can only talk about what happened to them when they lived in other cultures.

Instrumentalism has influenced theology. Postmodern theologians are persuaded that all human knowledge is shaped by cultural and historical contexts. If this is true, then theology, too, is influenced by the culture and historical experiences of the theologians. There can be no totally objective theology. It is our human search for God—our God-talk, not God’s revelation to us. This means we must speak of theologies, not Theology, for there are as many theologies as there are human points of view. There are African, Indian and Chinese theologies, feminine and masculine theologies, and theologies of the oppressed, the powerful and the middle class.

An Instrumentalist epistemology changes our view of Christian mission. It has raised the difficult questions of contextualization--the need to embody the Gospel in the local cultural forms in ways that the people understand. Can Christianity be done differently from the ways we do it? If so, how differently can Christians in other cultures do it? Is our Christianity normative for all? To what extent has our ways of doing Christianity been shaped by the Gospel and to what extent by our culture? How can we avoid having the Gospel seen by the people as foreign, and marginal to their lives?

The stress on contextualization calls for communication and Bible translation to be receptor oriented, measured not by what speaker says, but receptor hears and understands. It

calls for radical contextualization in which conversion calls for a minimum of cultural dislocation.

In Instrumentalism all religions are seen as autonomous, incommensurable paradigms. Therefore, we have no privileged position from which we can claim Truth, we must affirm them as subjectively true. It claims that Christianity is arrogant in its claims to be the only way to God, and the argument by some that there is saving truth in other religions. The task of mission, therefore, is not to evangelize and seek to win people from other religions to follow Jesus Christ. All religions must be respected as different people's ways of seeking God. Dialogue is the basis of mission. Mission is also ministry to people according to their felt needs. We must begin where people are and let them define the agenda and the solution. Salvation is defined largely as justice and liberation from oppressive systems. Our task is to join in solidarity with those suffering dehumanization by identifying with them in their pain

Post-postmodern Anthropology

In recent years, there have been a growing number of critiques of postmodern anthropology. It has served as a corrective to the arrogance and imperialism of early Positivist anthropology, which saw reason and empiricism as sufficient to determine truth. But postmodernity offers no answers to the questions humans face in living together in a culturally pluralist world full of oppression, violence or poverty. Postmodern anthropology is ego centered. The anthropologist cannot tell us anything about the people she studies, only what happened to her while she lived among them. All metanarratives are imperialistic and oppressive. All we can truly speak of is the many narratives of individuals as seen from their own perspectives. In the

end, postmodernity is in danger of becoming voyeurism, a study of the exotic, with little to offer modern humans today other than entertainment.

Modernity fails because it is rooted in the worldview assumption that translation is possible, and propositions true across languages and cultures. Mark Hobert writes,

This 'myth of perfect communication' presumes that understanding cannot be partial, even in our own culture. . . . Behind the myth are several pernicious and related dichotomies. Either one understands people or one doesn't. Either statements are true or they are not. Either native beliefs accord with the universality of logic, perception, classification or what not, or they are culturally specific. Either native utterances are factual [propositional or rational] or they are symbolic (1987, 38).

Postmodern anthropology fails because it holds that we can never understand other people at all. We are each locked up in our own subjective worlds, and there are no objective ways to test whether we see things the same ways or not.

Post-postmodern anthropology challenges both modernity and postmodernity by seeking to discern both the nature of human knowledge, and its relationship to 'reality.' It agrees that human knowledge is socially constructed by communities of people, but it argues that these constructs must, to a great extent, correspond to external realities for the people to live. In the hunt, the hunter does not simply imagine a deer. If he does, he will bring home no game. He must discern between his own illusions and reality in order to bring home food for the table. Similarly, a man driving down a city street must know in his mind what is going on if he is to reach home safely. This does not mean that his knowledge is complete—it is always partial. Nor does it mean that his knowledge is not culturally shaped—he may drive by the law, as Americans expect, or by relationships, negotiating his way past trucks, cars, motorcycles, ox carts, and pedestrians of many types—humans, cows, water buffalo, sheep, dogs and chickens. But it does

mean that he must seek to avoid hitting other traffic on the road, and to do so his knowledge in some significant ways must correspond to what is 'out there.'

The foundation for the epistemology underlying this view of knowledge is Critical Realism. This is a much humbler view of human knowledge. It holds that there is a real world outside, and that people from different cultures experience it. They construct mental models or maps of this reality which can be quite different from one another, but that each must correspond to outside realities in essential ways if they are to be of any use to humans. Critical Realism holds that reason and empiricism are not sufficient to discern the truth, but they are useful guides we can draw upon. It rejects cultural relativism in which ethnographies are seen as elegant fiction, or ingenious and informative mental sketches. It recognizes that as humans we see through a glass darkly, but that *we do see*.

Critical Realism allows us to study and compare cultures without the arrogance and domination of Positivist science or nihilism of Instrumentalism.. It sees all humans as seeking to make sense of the world around them. They do so by constructing knowledge systems which are attempts to understand a real world outside. The world outside does not fall into neat categories, such as 'trees,' 'bushes,' 'grass,' and so on. Each tree is different from the next, and each category we create overlaps with the others we use to make sense of our world. Critical Realism acknowledges the fact that different cultures can construct different mental images of reality, but that these all need, in some way, to correspond to reality, or life is impossible.

Knowledge, in a Critical Realist view is like maps. Maps are selective: there are road, railroad, sewer and electrical power maps. Moreover, maps are simplified schemes that claim to be true on certain things, but not on others. For example, a road map must show the relationship

between various streets to be true, but it need not show each curve and bridge to be true. In fact, if a map contains too much information, it is useless. Knowledge in Critical Realism is always focused, partial and approximate. Human minds cannot grasp the fullness of this universe, let alone the fulness of God.

The fact that maps differ does not mean they are contradictory. Rather, each maps a certain aspect of reality. Similarly, different cultures (and different academic disciplines) focus on different parts of reality, and ignore what may be seen as central in other cultures. In anthropology it is important, then, to learn to see the world through different eyes, and realize that all have some validity and some limitations. The development of an etic grid emerging from many emic perspectives can help us not only to translate between cultures, but also to see a much bigger picture of reality.

To use another metaphor, Critical Realist knowledge is like a montage. We see thousands of faces of people who have been patients of a certain doctor, but they are put together so that we see behind these pictures the face of the doctor who healed them. Or we see the faces of many Christians, and taken together we see the face of Christ.

Critical Realism takes a humble view of human knowledge, and does not grant a privileged position to science or any other belief system. This is not to say that all are equally good in answering specific questions, but none can claim authority to judge the others. Each can bear witness to what it claims to have found, and judgment between them is ultimately a matter of faith, not proof. Rather it recognizes “the fact that even the truest description comes nowhere near faithfully reproducing the way the world is. . . . (no true description) tells us *the* way the world is, but each of them tells *a* way the world is (Goodman 1972: 29, 31). Critical Realism

also brings thoughts, feelings and morals together. All three are present in all belief systems. Bracketing out feelings and morals does not lead to objective knowledge,

Critical Realism is based on community hermeneutics. No one specialist sees and knows the whole picture. It is through dialogue that we see reality from different perspectives. Burke writes, "it is by the approach through a variety of perspectives that we establish a character's reality. . . . [W]e could say that characters possess *degrees of being* in proportion to the variety of perspectives from which they can with justice be perceived (1969, 504).

Cross-cultural understandings begin with recognizing that there are different ways of representing reality, and that a dialectical process is needed for each party to understand the other, and to compare the two. We begin by using all kinds of information to try to grasp what our informants tell us about what we see. Our first impressions are often wrong, but as we interact with the people, our previous assumptions are modified, and our knowledge and understanding comes closer to theirs. This dialectic between our informants and our own representations goes both ways. As we study them, they are studying us, and as we increasingly learn to think as they do, and they begin to understand us. We need to keep in mind that in all communication, even within a culture, there will be widespread miscommunication, but there is also a possibility of basic communication. Our mutual understandings are never complete or perfect, but they do enable us to communicate and to learn from one another, and to understand one another more fully.

We must also remember that in an increasingly glocalized world, people from many cultures interact with one another, and that knowledge from one to another is spread, reinterpreted, misunderstood, and corrected. No culture is an island to itself. It has links to the world that are bridgeheads for the development of mutual understandings.

How does theology look in a Critical Realist mode? First, evangelical Critical Realists would differentiate between theology and Scripture, and ascribe final and full authority to the latter as the inspired, divinely-superintended record of God acting and entering in human history. The Bible is divine revelation, the source and criterion against which we measure theological truth. Theology, on the other hand, is our best human understandings of Scripture. It is our personal and corporate confession of what we believe. To say that it is a confession is not to reflect doubt, but to affirm our strong conviction not only to understand but also to live by these truths.

As Critical Realists we would recognize that our theologies are rooted in Scripture, but they are also influenced by our human contexts, both cultural and historical. We may “see through a glass darkly” because of the limits of our human knowledge, but we “do see.” We are not simply looking in a mirror. To recognize that our understanding of Scripture is always shaped by our contexts, we need to study both Scripture and our context to see how our contexts shape our interpretation of divine revelation.

The contextual nature of theology raises a difficult question. Committed Christians in different historical and cultural contexts develop theologies that differ in the categories they use, the questions they ask, the assumptions they make, and the logics they use. We must, therefore, speak first of theologies, for each theology is a human understanding of divine revelation in a particular historical and cultural context. This does not deny Theology–truth as God knows it. Rather, it recognizes that all human theologies are partial and culturally biased, and that the truth in the Scripture is greater than our understanding of it. There is room, therefore, for spiritual maturation and growth in our theologies, but this means we must constantly test our theologies

against Scripture and the theologies of our brothers and sisters in Christ acting as a hermeneutical community. Divine revelation and historical realities do not change, but our understandings of them do.

What are the implications of a Critical Realist perspective for missions? One has to do with our understanding of evangelism and discipleship. Positivists claim to know objective truth, and see evangelism as proclaiming theological verities. They often attack other religions to discredit them with the hope that their followers will turn to Christ. But this rarely works: attacks and arguments often drive people way from the Gospel as they seek to defend their beliefs. Non-Christians see this polemical stance as arrogant and accuse the missionaries of being more interested in proving correct doctrines than in listening to them as humans.

Critical Realists hold to objective truth, but recognize that it is understood by humans in their contexts. There is, therefore, an element of faith and personal commitment in the knowledge of truth. This subjective appropriation of objective truth has several consequences for Christian mission. First, Critical Realists have deep convictions about the truth and bear testimony to them. Mission to non-Christians begins with witness—in affirming “I believe . . .” Stanley Jones writes, “When I was called to the ministry, I had a vague notion that I was to be God’s lawyer. I had to argue his case for him and put it up brilliantly. . . . [I]n my ministry [I learned] I was to be, not God’s lawyer, but his witness. That would mean that there would have to be living communication with Christ so that there would always be something to pass on (1925, 141).”

Conversion in this view is not simply mental acceptance of a set of theological truths. It is a change in a person[’s central allegiance and a personal commitment to follow Christ in life

and in death. It is both a point and a process. Justification and sanctification are inseparable elements of the same transformation.

This view recognizes both felt and real needs, and seeks to minister to the whole person. We may start with felt needs, but we must move to the ultimate human needs of salvation, and reconciliation both here and in eternity.

A Critical Realist stance has implications for how we view contextualization. The response of Positivist missionaries has often been one of radical displacement. To become Christian people had to become modern. In reaction, anti-colonial advocates, mostly Instrumentalists, called for radical contextualization, assuming that all cultures are good and that all forms of Christianity are syncretistic to some degree. Critical Realists see cultures not as morally neutral, but as mixtures of personal and corporate good and evil. They call for critical contextualization, an ongoing response of the church that sees that the gospel as divine revelation is outside culture, and cannot be equated with any particular culture. It recognizes that for this revelation to be made known to humans it must be put into cultural forms that the people understand. But it sees the Gospel not as information to be believed, but as a transforming power that changes individuals, communities and cultures to Christlikeness and the Kingdom of God. This process requires a deep study of human cultures (phenomenology), a thorough study of Scripture and what we can learn from studying God's creation and an evaluation of human situations in the light of Revelation and reality checks (ontology), and a process to transform persons and cultures in the light of ontological truth (missiology).

In our post-post modern world, it is important as Christians and missionaries that we examine our own cultural assumptions in the light of Biblical teachings. This is especially true

of our epistemological and semiotic assumptions, for these are foundational to the way we think about Christianity and do missions. This new era also affords us tremendous possibilities in Christian missions. We no longer have to be God's lawyers, proving to people the truth of the Gospel. We can be bold witnesses to what we have experienced and know. The gospel we bring is not abstract propositional truth, it is a living relationship with Christ that involves our whole beings—cognitive, affective and moral. We no longer come with a sense of arrogance and superiority, as those who have found the whole truth. We invite people to follow Christ and the church and to let him transform their cultures.

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