

# **Anthropologists Taking an Interest in Christianity, and Missionaries in Anthropology: A Constructive Contextual Engagement**

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## **Abstract**

Missionaries adopting anthropologists' "radical openness" to people can, in vital ways, improve Western comprehension of, and ongoing participation with, indigenous African Christianity and its theologies. Many anthropologists have recently turned to studying Christianity. Western missionaries' selective adoption of anthropologists' rules of engagement, guided by "vulnerable mission" principles, could facilitate a healing of damaging extant intercultural comprehension gaps. Drawing on personal field missionary experience, and especially the work of Vähäkangas, this article seeks to bring hope to greater unity between theological expertise in the West governed by written texts and predominantly oral ecclesial expression in Africa and elsewhere.

**Key Words:** Africa, anthropology, mission, theology

## **Introduction**

While the term "anthropology" used in this article refers predominantly to social anthropology, there is also some overlap with linguistic anthropology, biological anthropology, and archaeology. This discussion is not primarily about missionaries' interest in what we could call "secular" anthropology. I am aware that many missionaries and missiologists have long engaged heavily with anthropology. It has been ironic that missionaries have taken advantage of insights arising from a discipline that has often sought to undermine them: "Findings and theories in the discipline of anthropology have been interpreted as undermining or even discrediting the claims of Christianity [yet at the same time] anthropological insights have been perceived to be compatible with or even to reinforce Christian faith" (Larsen 2014, 1).

The focus here is not on historical ways in which missionaries and missiologists have taken an interest in anthropology. Rather, what is germane here are the implications of movement in the other direction: (secular) anthropologists researching Christianity and, at least to some extent, other people's ways of life as if they were theological systems. I refer to people's "ways of life," rather than to their "religions," because of the enormous problematic I consider to be associated with the nature of the category "religion" in English usage in the West (Havea et al. 2022). It is this movement of anthropology exploring Christianity that I here encourage missionaries to investigate. I look at "the utility of theological concepts for anthropological inquiry" (Havea et al. 2022, 298), noting that we are seeing "an increased interest in a dialogue between anthropology and theology," from the side of anthropologists. Such increase is "evidenced in part by a suite of edited volumes on this theme" (Havea et al. 2022, 298). For example, see Lauterbach & Vähäkangas (2020), Lemons (2018), and Tomlinson & Mathews (2018).

This article brings a "contextual critique" by drawing insights from and being influenced by the author's positioning in East Africa and his close interactions with indigenous people. (I have lived in East Africa from 1988 to date.) The critique is constructive because it shows how anthropology's move towards theology empowers (or potentially empowers) missionaries. The

article is theological in presupposing a theological reality: a broadly evangelical view of Jesus, of the gospel, and of Christianity.

The reputation of anthropologists has been that they bracket-off issues related to God and theology. Recently, however, many anthropologists have taken a deep interest in Christianity. This change that is influencing the whole discipline should be of interest to missionaries, and here I attempt to inform them on what is going on.

Today's anthropology originated in a gradual move away from its foundation in Christian missionaries' desire to understand the people they were reaching, into becoming a secular university discipline (Harries & Maxwell 2012, 7). The rise of materialist anthropology after World War II "sealed the separation of missionaries and professional anthropologists" (Harries & Maxwell 2012, 24). The discipline of anthropology as a whole has acquired a reputation for being anti-Christian.

Anthropology is considered by many to be a complement to sociology. Traditionally at least, sociology is the study of one's own people, while anthropologists set out to explore other people, their cultures and ethnicities (BJYU's 2024; Bodenhimer 2019). Anthropology is perhaps best known for its efforts at studying the "primitive." Classically, anthropologists study the ways of life of primitive people from a secular perspective. They tend to explain away whatever is not built on recognizable Western secular foundations. Thus, according to Mair, they articulate, on a Marxist basis, what people understand themselves as doing through religious motivation. To use Mair's own words, religious people—preeminently missionaries—have acted on the basis of "the reality of power, greed, and exploitation" (Havea et al. 2022, 315). Many anthropologists have "despised" Christianity and Christian mission, Beidelman being perhaps a particularly extreme instance of such (Beidelman 1982). (Certainly though, not all anthropologists have been of this ilk. Some, such as Turner, Douglas, and Evans-Pritchard, have themselves been active Christians; see Larsen 2014.)

Since the most recent turn of the century, there has been a broad change in direction. In the new direction, anthropologists have themselves been challenged to consider why, if they study every other way of life under the sun, they had been avoiding taking Christians, churches, and theology seriously. Many have recently taken up this theological challenge and also extended it to non-Christian religious traditions.

The study of Christianity by anthropologists is made especially challenging given anthropology's own roots in the Church.—This These Christian roots fundamentally confront anthropology's self-understood *outward looking gaze*. Anthropologists used to consider themselves as standing on a relatively firm neutral platform from which they could legitimately evaluate everyone else, as if others are set out in a panorama in front of them (Havea et al. 2022, 304). Their discipline has more recently required them to be reflexive, and to consider aspects of their own identity and origins, e.g., C. A. Davies' *Reflexive Ethnography* (1999). They are being challenged to question whether the foundation of secularism on which they stand is as firm as it once felt. Many are realising that several of the key building blocks on which the discipline of anthropology has been constructed actually originate in the gospel.

Anthropologists are often not afraid to pull their punches. As probably with every discipline in the world, certainly theology included, there are many internal disagreements. Yet, a "return" of anthropology to an examination of the Christian Scriptures, if primarily through their impact on

human society, indicates the possibility of a kind of re-invigoration of the Church, especially in its foreign-mission endeavours.

What follows is a theologically-informed critical engagement with anthropology. The critical aspect is rooted in appreciation for the distance that anthropology has managed to travel already to rectify prior epistemological weakness. First, though, is a drawing on the author's own experience in interaction with Mike Vähäkangas's demonstration of how anthropology can assist missionaries in the evaluative part of their task.

### **Indigenous African Christianities, Theology, and Anthropology**

Christian believers, including expatriate missionaries, frequently struggle to comprehend, and in some cases to value, activities and beliefs of churches that have African roots. Vähäkangas helpfully and clearly articulates how anthropology can help to provide insights that can enable relating to widespread African Christian contexts (Vähäkangas 2020). His particular focus in the chapter I will consider in detail here is on the Kimbanguist Church in the Congo. I will also draw on considerable personal experience of relating to and interacting with Kimbanguist believers.

This church, that has many branches around the world, claims to have millions of members. Its founder, Simon Kimbangu, was “persecuted” by the colonial powers ruling Congo (Vähäkangas 2020, 139-140). His persecution, followed by the forced dispersion of his followers, rather than having the desired intent of nipping Kimbanguism in the bud, actually spread it and drew attention to it. Strikingly, the Kimbanguist Church has been a member of the WCC (World Council of Churches) since 1969 (Vähäkangas 2020, 135). There has been much discussion as to whether it should continue to be a member. The major issue under discussion is usually the Kimbanguist doctrine of incarnation. Many Kimbanguist believers—and this seems to be a part of the oral tradition if not their written tradition—consider Simon Kimbangu to be the Holy Spirit who Jesus said would come after his departure (John 16:7) (Vähäkangas 2020, 140).

For many analysts, a doctrine that claims the founder of a church other than Jesus to be the Holy Spirit would be a clear indication that the church concerned is not genuinely Christian at all. On this basis, the Kimbanguist Church should be expelled from the WCC (Vähäkangas 2020, 135). At the same time, much of the practice of the church is clearly Christian (Vähäkangas 2020, 134). Refusing such a church's Christian identity by refusing its WCC membership may well create waves, some of which will later be judged to be unhelpful. The WCC is presumably trying to be careful to avoid causing problems that would interfere with its aim of bringing people into the body of Christ.

European churches and their branches have been profoundly influenced by Hellenistic thinking. From early on Greek influence, that has profoundly formed church history, has contributed to related churches participating in a tradition of literacy. Ecumenical debates thus frequently revolve around differences between churches found in written documentation (Vähäkangas 2020, 135). For their part, many African peoples have only very recently been exposed to Hellenism and to literacy. Unless Hellenism is considered integral to Christianity itself—a position that may make it impossible for African people to be Christian when not under Western domination—then presumably one can be genuinely Christian without being Hellenistic. However, the nature of this kind of Christianity that is genuinely Christian without great Greek influence remains a mystery to many in the West. (While Kimbanguism is the case study here under review, I am drawing on over 30 years of experience of close mother-tongue engagement

with a variety of indigenously founded churches in East Africa. The issue of “not being Hellenistic” is widespread even if the doctrine of incarnation may not be a particularly prominent concern.)

The question then arises: if practitioners of not-Hellenistic Christianity give only minimum weight to written documentation, how should Hellenised Christians evaluate them? Is written documentation on doctrine and theology necessary for a church to be truly Christian? How does the nature of African understanding and African languages impact evaluations of orthodoxy? Unless we say Christianity must be Hellenistic, which understandably missiologists and theologians are reluctant to do, are we to form two categories of “Christianity,” namely Hellenistic and non-Hellenistic? How would these two categories relate to one another?

Vähäkangas points out that the absence of written documentation and a “common conceptual universe” can be very disarming to theological investigation (Vähäkangas 2020, 136). It is at this point that he suggests anthropology can help. Anthropology is “radical[ly] open ... to others” (Vähäkangas 2020, 137). Such an openness can be a foundation to a kind of thorough exploration of the nature of the “other” that is not open to missionaries, for whom doctrinal prerequisites must be in place before they can enter into close fellowship. In the absence of authoritative written materials, the only way for an outsider to discover what an indigenous African church is actually about is through participating in its oral expressions. Hence Vähäkangas identifies an “essential” role, or at least a potentially very helpful role, that can be filled by anthropology, with issues of theological orthodoxy in mind. He suggests “participatory observation, informal discussions, and semi-structured interviews” (Vähäkangas 2020, 145) be the anthropological method that will provide data on “lived belief” that will in due course help missionaries to gain at least some understanding and, as need be, to carry out their evaluations.

Vähäkangas stops far short of implying that anthropology is a kind of “substitute” for theology. Instead, he points to an “abyss” that separates anthropological analysis from practiced faith (Vähäkangas 2020, 138) (and from the ways of life of non-Western people, i.e., people not historically profoundly influenced by Hellenism in general). That is to say that, while contemporary anthropological methods can produce data, use of its secular foundations in analysing data would render it little more than useless to the non-Hellenistic people studied (Vähäkangas 2020, 137-138) as well as, at least to a certain extent, to those who take faith in God seriously, in particular missionaries. Many anthropologists work on a Marxist basis, assuming a context of “the reality of power, greed, and exploitation” (Havea et al. 2022, 34). Vähäkangas seeks to find a way of utilising anthropology’s approaches to research without rendering its findings so reductive as to be a negation or an attack on living faith.

Vähäkangas thus articulates the parameters of an approach similar to the one I have taken over the last 36 years, since 1988: I have frequently visited indigenously led African churches in East Africa. While in some ways very clearly Christian, these churches at the same time engage in various practices that would, by “Hellenistic Christians,” be considered beyond the pale. Condemning them for being so would imply that their use of the Bible, calling on the name of Jesus, proclaiming Christian doctrines, plus healings, worship, prophecy, and much dedication and commitment to God might all be worse than useless. Instead of quickly jumping to a condemning conclusion, I have taken advantage of my reading in anthropology to acquire an understanding of common practices as a means of comprehending why the people concerned did things that Western

Christianity roundly condemns, as well as why at the same time those same people do not find them condemned in their own devoted understanding of the Christian Scripture.

By way of example, members of these churches often relate closely to their ancestors. They do this by learning from them through dreams and visions and by taking advantage of insights acquired to interpret contemporary events—why someone is sick, how failure in business could be avoided, which colour of candle would be most effective against an evil spirit, for example. From “where they stand” with no indigenous written tradition, no alternative to guidance from ancestors is available. Community life requires rules that go beyond what the Bible offers—compare, for example, how Catholic theologians have acquired a comprehensive set of laws from Rome (Holland 2019, 269)—and the community has followed those rules for all of known oral history. The absence of alternatives requires an ongoing following of ancestral command—an ancestral “command” that is not written but is spiritually “revealed.” Anthropology has long opened doors for me to relate to such people while, as Vähäkangas articulates, the same anthropology provides little or no reason as to why or on what basis to relate. Those guidelines come from the Scripture and Christian tradition—hence my motivation for relating to African churches has been to share the good news of Jesus with them. For its part, anthropology provides some tools and suggests research approaches that I have found helpful.

### **A “Vulnerable” Approach**

Much missiological engagement in Africa has been grounded on certain assumptions regarding translation, broadly speaking that translation can in a simple way convey meaning from any source to any target language. Even though a foreign imposition onto Africans, Western missionaries in Africa increasingly acquiesce to use of European languages in their engagements with African people. They assume that what they say (even though they are communicating as if to Hellenised people in Western contexts, with minimal adaption to what to them are little-understood African circumstances) will be understood by local people as if they too are European. The same missionaries typically control significant (at least in local terms) budgets, that they seek to direct to those Africans who are following doctrines of European origins that please them. Hence African people have ample motivation for maintaining, as far as possible, an appearance of understanding and implementing Western norms. Often lacking the kinds of anthropological orientations described above, many missionaries stand across-from, rather than together-with, indigenous people, maintaining an identity and role as a “benevolent foreigner.”

The alternative approach that I advocate here is that a missionary should engage key people he is reaching entirely using indigenous languages and resources. I have articulated this “vulnerable” approach in more detail elsewhere (Harries J. 2015). My primary reason for stressing *entirely* using indigenous languages and resources is to avoid the deep jealousies that can be created in indigenous contexts should resource provision or language exposure and guidance be extended on the basis of some sort of partiality. Because one cannot help but be partial, i.e., prejudiced in who one relates to, helping everyone the same is an impossible dream, so that handing out goodies (whether linguistic or material) will be problematic!

Refusing to have foreign resources available for distribution facilitates relating to people of different doctrinal and theological persuasions. That is to say, as illustrated in the section above, indigenous African people—not having the background that could enable them to “appropriate” Western theology lock-stock-and-barrel—will invariably need to develop a theology that at the same time enables them to maintain certain “traditions.” To condemn the continuation of such

traditions is to drive them underground. I suggest that appropriate theology, developed by encouraging people to engage with the gospel, is more helpful than judgemental condemnation of what the outsider does not understand. Participation or at least non-condemnation, not as a donor but as a witnessing believer, in what goes on keeps an outside missionary engaged and on a learning curve.

To those who might find such a vulnerable approach a little weak-kneed, I acknowledge that more confrontational approaches have biblical precedent. I do suggest, however, that more confrontational approaches require a concomitant positioning. A widespread biblical precedent for confrontation is a self-positioning in weakness. Classic biblical examples abound: Stephen stood up to the Sanhedrin. Then he was stoned to death (Acts 7:59-60). Paul stood up to Jewish Christian practices. Eventually he was executed (tradition tells us after frequent beatings and stonings) (1 Corinthians 11:23-27). The prophet Jeremiah stood up to King Zedekiah and was thrown into a cistern (Jeremiah 38:6). Those who threw him in intended him to die there. A readiness for suffering, including death, is a kind of ratification that one is serious about one's radical advocacy. Such a commitment requires missionaries who refuse to use lawyers and legal procedures in their defence, who do not live in singularly heavily guarded homes, who refuse to pack their bag and flee if there is trouble, who do not "buy" friends using their foreign-sourced money, and other advantageous resources. In short, a missionary should only openly confront in a way that both requires an exclusive following of a practice or teaching (theologically or otherwise) and assuming a position sufficiently vulnerable to suffer or even die, in consequence of people's refusal to agree and comply.

Anthropologists' strengths identified by Vähäkangas include their "radical openness to the other" (Vähäkangas 2020, 137). Anthropology is deeply rooted in a tradition of non-judgementalism, endeavouring instead always to identify reasonable cause for what might initially seem the most extraordinary behaviour. This sympathetic approach is a strength of anthropology. Then, however, their further analysis generally renders anthropologists, as far as local communities are concerned, extractive. Haynes asks, "What's harder to do ... is finding ways to critique the structures that ethnography reveals in terms that are meaningful to those they study" (Havea et al. 2022, 324). That is, anthropologists' write ups typically require them to position themselves in a long academic tradition put in place by their anthropological forefathers that is unfamiliar to, and may make little sense to, those studied. An "anthropologist" is one who is familiar with previous anthropologists and can engage with their writings and thinking. Those previous anthropologists and that anthropological tradition are not rooted in the field where they do their research but in (usually) distant Western universities that function on the basis of much Hellenistic thinking.

I believe there is a reason why anthropologists currently maintain this distant detached stand. They realise that they have little to say that is relevant in their research context. Some fear, for example, that seeking to have things to say in a context replete with spirits and "religious" forces will turn them into theologians. Yet despite its Christian origins classical anthropology is also deeply rooted in secular atheistic liberalism—although, as Boggs points out, the way that anthropology functions on the basis of "culture theory" constantly also compromises liberalism (Boggs 2004, 189). That is to say, as explained by Vähäkangas, "Anthropology ... challenges the secular modern claims of universality. On the other hand, it is a secular modern project" (2022, 97). Broadly speaking, it can be very open in its research, but very narrow in its write-ups. Missionaries and theologians operate differently. They can be "transcending the researcher-researched barrier when studying faith communities" (2022, 97). "A theologian is a member of the

studied community” Vähäkangas adds by way of explanation (2022, 97). From personal experience, when I as a Western missionary visit an African Church, I am also a fellow forgiven sinner seeking to know God’s will for my life.

There is a need both for honesty regarding the extractive nature of anthropology and for closing the gap between anthropology and theology. If anthropologists are not to lose their “radical openness,” they ought also to seek to be locally relevant and not only (or primarily) to please an evaluative committee in an alien (Western) context. Anthropologists’ functional theological naïveté renders them incapable of bridging the gap between their own discipline and theology. Missionaries, then, must rise to the challenge of meeting both needs and, at least on occasion, wear anthropological hats.

### **Missionaries to Be Anthropologists**

My proposal is not that missionaries lean more and more on secular anthropologists. While secular anthropologists have produced much information that can be useful to missionaries, they actually conceal certain more controversial and adverse aspects of their work. Their short-term in-and-out approach—often less than a year on the field, such as Gammelin who did only eight months of fieldwork before writing a research article (Gammelin 2020)—plus their deep engagement with orientations to indigenous peoples rooted in secular modernity, make them often unsuitable bedfellows for missionaries. There has long been a pattern, at least in African contexts, of anthropologists being dependent on missionaries in many ways, drawing on them for expert insights while building their own towers (cf. the tower of Babel in Genesis 11) from a position of misunderstanding of the work the very missionaries are doing. Perhaps the latest turn of anthropology to studying Christianity and mission may finally help to rectify anthropologists’ heretofore disjointed relationship with missionaries.

Some readers may be wondering on which specific bases I fault anthropologists. Here are some examples:

1. The late Ralph Winter endeavoured to avoid the problematic associated with an identity as a missionary in Guatemala, so he chose instead to go to the field as an “anthropologist.” He then regretted having done so, finding that on the field the reputation of anthropologists was worse than that of missionaries. (Winter 2008, 43ff.). I believe that, amongst the reasons for these different reputations is that, for all their many failings, missionaries work according to comprehensive and mutually agreed upon moral codes such as those regarding alcohol consumption and sexual promiscuity. Missionaries set out to love the people they are reaching. Many anthropologists do not consider themselves bound by any such moral requirements, ethical codes, or heartfelt sympathies toward people they research.
2. A set of discussions edited by Havea et al. (2022) help me to make a few more points. This set of discussions is between anthropologists and representatives of what are referred to as “world religions.” (I recommend reading all of these discussions.) I here simply point to some “confessions” made in some honest reporting:
  - a. The presence of the “abyss” between people studied and the theory and writing up underlying anthropological work is illustrated by Rasayanagam acknowledging that, although he is non-exclusive (radically open) in the way he carries out his research, he has been very narrow and exclusive (Havea et al. 2022, 310), ghettoizing the “religious”

amongst his students in the way he once presented his insights in a classroom (Havea et al. 2022, 308).

- b. As described earlier, “vulnerable mission” involves missionaries engaging people by using indigenous languages and resources. Indigenous language knowledge is needed to enable a grasping of what people are “actually” saying. Avoidance of liberal use of outside resources is needed to ensure that people don’t talk for money. Many anthropologists work through translators (evidenced by the relatively short time, for example less than a year, that they spend on the field), and some make gifts to their informers (Havea et al. 2022, 331).

The key prerequisites for missionaries to engage in anthropological research are also, in my view, those of vulnerable mission. Linguistically, local language knowledge is needed to acquire close understanding of the categories in which indigenous people think. The question of resources links specifically with theological concerns for doctrinal orthodoxy. I am inclined to agree that for a missionary sent to the field to promote orthodox (small o) Christian belief to make significant financial contributions to what is to many not Christianity at all can be problematic. Indigenous African churches, such as the Kimbanguist Church explored by Vähäkangas, may fall into that “problematic” category. A pre-emptive judging regarding who is orthodox and whose theology is problematic is likely to generate indigenous jealousies, suspicions, and conflicts. Such judgement would be implied if a missionary is generous to those he considers orthodox but not generous to those about whom he has doubts. The way to avoid this kind of judgementalism has to be to not have to be partial in decisions about resources, i.e., for a missionary to delegate generous giving to others. Those “others” must be those whom the “vulnerable missionary” does not directly influence.

## Conclusion

The field of anthropological research has long been functioning largely independently of the Church. For much of its history it has been known to be antagonistic to Christianity. A recent turn to extending its study to include Christianity offers enormous hope for improved mutual understanding between anthropologists and Christians—missionaries in particular. Anthropological methodologies have much to offer to the Church, particularly anthropologists’ non-judgemental openness to others. The Church also has much to offer to anthropology, especially an evident morally defensible motivation for long term close association with the “other,” i.e., the desire to share the gospel of Jesus with them. While Christians, including missionaries, have long taken advantage of insights they obtain through learning outcomes of anthropological research, in this article I suggest that some missionaries should be more serious about themselves researching people they are reaching. Researching beyond the boundaries of orthodox Christian participation, without raising questions of misdirected efforts, is rendered possible if the missionaries concerned commit themselves to a constant confining themselves to use of indigenous languages and resources. Missionaries are, after all, supposed to reach the lost. Is understanding “the lost” and why they are lost not a part of that outreach?

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