

TRANSCENDENCE AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHRISTIANITY

LANGUAGE, CHANGE, AND INDIVIDUALISM

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• JOEL ROBBINS •

ABSTRACT

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Is there anything like a unique anthropological understanding of the nature of Christianity? Although still quite new, over the last decade the anthropology of Christianity has become a robust field of discussion and debate. Given its rapid development, the time has perhaps come to consider this question. Perhaps surprisingly, a clue toward an answer can be found in Westermarck's work. In his book on Christian Morality, Westermarck focuses on the way in which this morality constitutes a transcendent ideal that is far removed from what human beings can in reality expect to morally accomplish. Though I do not take his full argument on board, in this lecture I argue that Westermarck was right to point to Christian ideas about transcendence as one of this religion's key features. Indeed, a focus on the nature, variety, and cultural consequences of Christian notions of transcendence is emerging as a distinctive feature of the anthropological approach to the study of Christianity. Building on this point, I suggest that exploring differences between various Christian approaches to transcendence is a key to synthesizing the most important early debates in the anthropology of Christianity. These debates have centered on 1) the ways Christians, and Protestants in particular, understand the nature and ideal uses of language; 2) the role of Christianity in fostering self-conscious efforts toward bringing about radical cultural change; and 3) the tendency of Christianity to foster various kinds of individualism among its converts. By gathering these debates together through a focus on transcendence, we can develop a specifically anthropological understanding of Christianity that not only allows for productive cross-cultural comparison, but that also helps us raise broader questions about the relation of transcendence to social life of importance across many fields of anthropology and the social sciences more generally.

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I am very honored to have the opportunity to deliver this lecture in memory of Edward Westermarck. It provides an occasion to acknowledge the ways in which some less-celebrated aspects of Westermarck's work foreshadow those trends in contemporary anthropology with which I find myself most engaged. For me, at least, Westermarck's relevance to the concerns I want to discuss today came as something of a surprise when I discovered it some years ago. I belong to that generation which learned about Westermarck only as an ancestor in the study of marriage and kinship—his familiarity breeds contempt theory of the incest taboo was enjoying some renewed visibility in the 1980s—and as an early practitioner of fieldwork who had to cede pride of place in the invention of this method to Malinowski by virtue of the fact that his time in Morocco did not quite serve to wrench him free of Victorian styles of writing and argument. When I left for my doctoral fieldwork in Papua New Guinea in the early 1990s, I assumed my engagement with Westermarck was well behind me. I could be grateful to him for his role in helping to found the discipline I was endeavoring to join, but I did not assume I would ever revisit his work again.

As we know, fieldwork often changes everything about the trajectories of intellectual lives in anthropology. Having found myself living in Papua New Guinea with a group of very devoted charismatic Christians whose members passed much of their time absorbed in the discussion of moral issues, I returned home to discover that Westermarck was one of the relatively few anthropologists from the past who had devoted himself to studying some of the topics my fieldwork would lead me to take up. For, as others knew but I did not, he had written extensively on morality. More than this, he devoted his final lengthy book, published just before his death in 1939, to the study of, as the title puts it, *Christianity and Morals*. Westermarck was not the only anthropological ancestor interested in morality, of course, though to the extent that he approached it with a thoroughly comparative eye, his work cannot but stand out as an important precursor to the currently emerging anthropology of morality. And in terms of being early to the study of Christianity, before very recently he has something of a claim to stand virtually alone as a prominent anthropologist who devoted a major monograph to the discussion of the Christian tradition in comparative perspective.

In fact, for a long time, Westermarck would have no real anthropological inheritors in regard to his interest in Christianity. As an active field of study, the anthropology of Christianity is quite new. Even as late as the middle of the 1990s, it did not yet exist. To be sure, before that time anthropologists had written a few ethnographies focused on Christian populations that considered their religious lives, but these works were largely neglected by the larger discipline. At best anthropologists received them primarily as contributions to regional studies rather than to broader discussions in the anthropology of religion, and these studies certainly did not coalesce into a cross-regional discussion in which scholars focused on different parts of the world read each others' works on Christianity and formulated the kinds of comparative questions that had long been asked of other 'world religions' such as Islam or Buddhism. Somehow, during anthropology's first century in existence, the discipline that eventually claimed to take the whole world as its domain of study had neglected to follow Westermarck's lead in attending at all to the world's single most widely practiced faith.

In retrospect, it is not hard to see that something was wrong with an anthropology that showed no discernable interest in Christianity. And it should thus perhaps not come as a shock that as soon as a doorway started to open on to Christianity as a legitimate object of anthropological study in the late 1990s, it turned out there were many anthropologists ready to push through it. Now, just ten or so years later, it often seems as if you cannot encounter even a small group of younger anthropologists without finding one who studies Christians somewhere or other in the world. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, there is no doubt that the serious anthropological conversation on Christianity that Westermarck's work foreshadowed has finally begun.

I do not want to dwell today on the reasons why the anthropology of Christianity has been so late in starting, a topic that has been well canvassed elsewhere (Bialecki et al. 2008; Cannell 2006; Robbins 2003a). Instead, I want to explore the question of whether the first decade of work in the anthropology of Christianity has produced anything like a distinctive anthropological understanding of the nature of this religion. Even at this early stage, it surely has generated a number of lively debates around particular topics. These include discussions about the kinds of cultural change Christianity tends to foster among converts, the distinctive ways Christians often think about language, and the contributions Christianity sometimes makes to the development of individualism in places where it has not previously been a dominant social form. But can we find a shared theoretical concern underlying anthropological discussions of Christian views of change, language, and individualism that might lend the anthropology of Christianity some early coherence as a field and some distinctiveness as an approach to a religion that is so well-studied by many other disciplines? My argument today will be that we can find such a shared concern.

In order to lay out what I think this shared theoretical concern consists in, let me go back for a moment to Westermarck's last book. Those of you who know Westermarck's *Christianity and Morals* can be forgiven for imagining, or even hoping, that my mention of it was only polite and that having acknowledged its existence I would leave its content to one side. It is in many ways a dyspeptic book, devoted to making the argument that Christianity has done humankind a huge disservice in the area of moral development, and that Christianity cannot be credited with any really beneficial effects on Western culture. In many places, the book reads as a four-hundred page catalog of Christianity's moral errors, and in Westermarck's drive to present as exhaustive a case against Christianity as possible, he seems to miss pretty much everything about the religion that makes it important to its followers. The philosopher T.M. Knox (1940: 93) voiced this kind of complaint in an early review, noting that 'Professor Westermarck states his case with immense learning. The two or three thousand footnotes are like a card index to the reading of a lifetime; and yet what they really demonstrate is the melancholy fact that it is possible to read a library of books and still be debarred from an understanding of the subjects with which they deal.'

It would be hard to argue that Knox's harsh reading is wholly wrong, and *Christianity and Morals* is not one of the works on which Westermarck's posterity rests. But if we look at why Westermarck is so critical of Christianity, we can see that despite his hostility to it he has in fact identified one of its most important features. Westermarck's argument is that the problem with Christianity is that it disregards what he understands to be the real

nature of human morality, which is rooted in human emotions that condemn acts seen as causing pain and reward those seen as causing pleasure. On Westermarck's analysis, Christian doctrines like that of justification by faith, and the demands Christianity sometimes makes for the perfect realization of duty, fly in the face of people's normal human moral understandings and capacities and only serve to lead them astray into what today we would call moral bad faith. A key statement of Westermarck's argument along these lines comes early in the book when he writes that over the course of history 'The gods have (...) experienced a gradual change for the better; until at last they are described as ideals of moral perfection, even though, when more closely scrutinized, their goodness and notions of justice are found to differ materially from what is deemed good and just in the case of men' (1969 [1939]: 21). By asking for too much in the way of moral performance, by presenting divinity as an ideal of moral perfection, Christianity becomes an 'antimoral' perversion of what people can really aim to attain in their moral lives. As Westermarck puts it later in the book, 'If the realization of the highest moral ideal is commanded by a moral law, such a law will always remain a dead letter, and morality will gain nothing' (ibid.: 401). Now, I am not a moral philosopher nor a moral psychologist, and I cannot address whether Westermarck is right to condemn Christianity for setting the moral bar too high for humans to reach. But I do think we can find something of value in his observations. My argument in what follows will be that the contemporary anthropology of Christianity has borne Westermarck out as right to identify Christianity as a religion that leads believers routinely to take up issues of how to relate ideals that point beyond what people normally accomplish to the lives people actually live. Christians everywhere, that is to say, take positions on how to relate a more or less intensely elaborated divine transcendent realm to their own mundane, human one. Indeed, it is precisely an interest in how people negotiate this relationship between the transcendent and the mundane that I think unifies the debates around change, language, and individualism that have so marked the early years of the anthropology of Christianity. Given this, even as I will set aside Westermarck's critical stance toward the Christian religion, I want to follow his hint about the important role of the ideal or the transcendent in Christianity in developing my argument in what follows.

Christianity and transcendence

Let me turn, then, to transcendence. For purposes of this lecture, I borrow my understanding of transcendence not from the glimpses of an argument about it I find in Westermarck, but from the discussion around the axial age hypothesis, first proposed by Jaspers (1953), and influentially elaborated by Eisenstadt (1982). At the heart of this hypothesis is the assertion that during the period that falls between roughly the eighth and the third centuries BCE a set of similar revolutions in ideas and in the institutional grounding of ideas occurred in a number of Eurasian cultures, including those of 'Ancient Israel, Ancient Greece (...) Zoroastrian Iran, early Imperial China and in the Hindu and Buddhist civilizations', and that Christianity and Islam, while coming later, were also based upon ideas that were recognizably axial-age in origin (Eisenstadt 1982: 294). The revolutions of the axial age were distinctive, on Eisenstadt's account, for leading to

‘the emergence, conceptualization and institutionalization of a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders’ (1982: 294). In all axial age societies, people came to perceive ‘a sharp disjunction between the mundane and the transmundane’, and they began to stress ‘the existence of a higher transcendental moral or metaphysical order which is beyond any given this- or other-worldly reality’ (1982: 296). The split between the divine and human realms in axial civilizations is thus not only a radical one—with the two being wholly distinct from one another—but it is also a hierarchical one, with the transcendent being more valued than the mundane.

In order to find the axial age hypothesis of interest, one has to accept that a marked split between the transcendent and the mundane was not in place in pre- or non-axial cultures. Eisenstadt (1982: 296) acknowledges that ‘the transmundane order has, in all human societies, been perceived as somewhat different, usually higher and stronger, than the mundane one’. But he goes on to argue that ‘in the pre-axial-age “pagan” civilizations this higher world has been symbolically structured according to principles very similar to those of the mundane or lower one’ (1982: 296). Furthermore, in such civilizations, there was little sense of a perfect moral order far removed from the mundane one that governs everyday life (1982: 296). This distinction between pre-axial and axial cultures is not on the face of things implausible. It is not, for example, difficult for someone who studies a place like Papua New Guinea to recognize some force in the claim that traditional religions were not structured around a radical distinction between the transcendental and the mundane. These are the kinds of religions in which gods are generally ancestors, ultimately relatives, and where even when they are not so recognizably human-like, they are generally thought to respond to various situations in the way contemporary men and women do, operating within similar moral and motivational systems to an extent Westermarck would have appreciated. These are the kinds of worlds where, as de Coppet and Iteanu (1995) put it for the cultures of Oceania, cosmos and society are one. It is only by breaking open this fusion of cosmos and society that a tradition becomes axial in character.

To this schematic model of axial cultures as ones in which an original fusion of cosmos and society has given way to a conception of a more perfect transcendent world that is in tension with a flawed earthly one, Eisenstadt and other axial age theorists add one further key feature. The opening of a chasm between the mundane and the transcendental, they argue, calls forth the creation of an intellectual elite (which includes not only scholars and educators, but also such characters as prophets and revolutionaries) whose purpose is to clarify the nature of the transcendental realm and, often, to lead movements that encourage people to try to lessen the tension between the divine and the human worlds by realizing the goals of the transcendent world within the mundane one in precisely the kinds of ways Westermarck was keen to critique.

Given the brief review I have just offered, it should perhaps come as no surprise that the axial age hypothesis has had virtually no uptake in anthropology. Its us-axial-modernizing vs. them-pre-axial-traditional binary exemplifies a style of blunt distinction making that is completely out of favor in the contemporary discipline. But it remains true that such broad dichotomies can sometimes be good to think with, and I want to suggest that if we understand axial age theory as providing ideal-typical models of two kinds of societies, rather than a philosophy of history formed around a notion of progress, we might be able

to make some use of it.¹ If we take this approach, the primary typological claim we would want to put forward is that cultures that make a radical and ranked distinction between the transcendental and the mundane are different from those that do not so radically separate and differentially value these two realms.

We can further refine this binary scheme by examining the way the relationship between the transcendental and the mundane is handled differently in the various axial traditions themselves. Eisenstadt (1986) makes a start on this when he differentiates between those traditions—notably Hinduism and Buddhism—which he says define the resolution of the transcend/mundane tension as something to be accomplished in the transcendent other-world (1986: 294–295), Confucianism, which aims for its resolution in this world (1986: 295–298, Eisenstadt 1985), and the monotheistic religions that interweave this-worldly and other-worldly resolutions to this tension (1986: 301).

I am not concerned with determining the accuracy of Eisenstadt's assignment of specific traditions to particular places on his grid, but I do want to situate Christianity where he situates it: as a tradition in which the relationship between the mundane and the transcendent is caught between this- and other-worldly tendencies and is therefore fundamentally unstable. One can find expressions of the Christian tradition where the transcendent is very different and far from the mundane, and others where it is more similar and close. Likewise, one can find many examples of Christians who assume the tension between the transcendent and the mundane can only be positively resolved in heaven, and those in which believers are enjoined to do all they can to resolve it in the mundane realm by realizing heaven on earth. In fact, one can sometimes find representatives of both kinds of positions within the same Christian community. As regards the fundamental distinctions that give axial age theory its shape, then, Christianity appears to be, as I noted above, highly unstable or malleable.

The diversity of Christian approaches to the relation of the transcendent to the mundane began to show up almost immediately in the anthropology of Christianity. In one of my first writings on the subject, I referred briefly to axial age theory and argued that different handlings of the relationship of the transcendent to the mundane bore watching as potentially a key area of comparative research (Robbins 2003a: 196). Shortly thereafter, Cannell (2005) argued strongly that social scientists, and anthropologists among them, had focused too much on those kinds of ascetic Christianity that stressed the great distance of the transcendent from the mundane, to the neglect of those forms, such as Mormonism and some forms of Catholicism, that strongly valorized this world and its material forms. Between our two discussions, something of the range of transcendental/mundane relations in Christianity had already been laid out, and in a later publication Cannell (2006) explicitly recognized Christian variability in the relation of the transcendent and the mundane as a key topic for anthropological investigation (see also Bialecki 2010: 702). More recently, Keane (2007: 41) has put the matter quite elegantly by suggesting that 'one factor that has entered into the production of Christianity's sheer complexity is precisely the recurrent conflict between purifying projects of transcendence and countermovements toward materialization, each provoking the other'.

And anthropologists are not alone in recently pointing to the variety of Christian forms of the transcendent/mundane relationship. The intellectual historian and political theorist Mark Lilla has recently argued that the protean nature of Christian thinking on

transcendence is visible in particular in ‘Christian conceptions of the Trinity’ (2007: 35). It is because of the trinity—with its distant and wholly other God, its once but no longer immanent Jesus, and its mobile Holy Spirit—that ‘it has proved possible in the history of Christian theology to develop very plausible—if ultimately irreconcilable—pictures of God that stress either his transcendence, or his immanence, or his remoteness’ (2007: 35). For Lilla, what is important about the malleability of Christian understandings of transcendence and immanence is that each such understanding underwrites its own political theology—some of which start from a vision of worldly political life as divinely infused and therefore good and others which rest on the assumption that it is far from the divine and therefore irredeemably flawed. For our purposes, we do not need to follow Lilla down the path of interrogating the grounding of different Christian political theologies, but we can take his broader point that each vision of the transcendent/mundane relationship plays itself out in a different kind of Christian social life. It is these differences that the anthropology of Christianity has already begun carefully to track.

Before I turn to showing how some of these differences have made themselves felt in studies that have already been carried out on issues of change, language, and individualism, I should add one qualification about the scope of my comparative ambitions here. Rather than exploring as many different kinds of Christianity as possible in this short article, I have opted to devote much of my attention to Pentecostal and charismatic forms of Christianity. These are the kinds of Christianity in which believers expect to be able to receive such gifts of the Holy Spirit as speaking in tongues, prophesying, and healing. More generally, believers in this tradition see the Holy Spirit as highly active in this world, and expect the mundane to be sometimes touched by supernatural power. In the sections that follow on change, language, and individualism, I often discuss Pentecostal and charismatic cases first, though I also compare them with other Christian traditions as my arguments unfold.

There are a number of reasons for devoting special attention to Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity. The most contingent of these are that my own expertise is in the study of what I will henceforth for ease of expression call simply Pentecostal Christianity, and that much of the early work in the anthropology of Christianity has been carried out in communities whose faith follows in this tradition. Another, more important, reason for focusing on the Pentecostal stream is that it is the fastest growing branch of Christianity in the world today, with over 600 million followers worldwide. The more I focus on Pentecostalism, therefore, the more likely I am to hit on issues of some interest for people carrying out research on Christians in almost any part of the world. And finally, as regards the theme of the malleability of the transcendent/mundane relationship, one can argue that Pentecostals give it a fuller airing *internally* than other forms of Christianity. As Massey (2006: 449) has noted, ‘Trinitarianism (or the doctrine of the Holy Trinity) in many ways stands at the very center of theology for Pentecostals and charismatics, due to their distinctive interest in the formulation and articulation of a theology of the Holy Spirit’. As Pentecostals reckon with what the regular earthly action of the Spirit means for their relationships with God, Jesus, other human beings, and themselves, they face quite directly the tensions inherent in the Christian approach to immanence and transcendence. Examining how they manage these tensions in regard to each of my main topics here thus proves a fruitful way of opening up a broader comparative discussion.

Christian conversion and cultural change

I turn now to the topic of Christianity and cultural change. Christianity is a religion that focuses a good deal of attention on the need for radical change and, I will argue, grounds the possibility for such change in ideas about the ways the transcendent realm can sometimes influence the mundane. That Christianity emphasizes the importance of radical change is true in several respects. Almost all kinds of Christianity, for example, narrate its history as one of radical rupture from the Judaism from which it sprang. Jesus' incarnation created a rupture in the continuity of history, and thus Christianity represents something genuinely new in the world. Christian eschatology in many, though not all, of its forms also focuses on a rupture in time—here in the future rather than in the past. And finally, with the demand for conversion, Christianity tends to call for a rupture in the personal history of those living in the present. Various forms of Christianity may stress only one or two of these ruptures in their doctrine and ritual. Thus, for example, evangelicals all stress the need for radical change at conversion, while its fundamentalist and sometimes its Pentecostal wings generally also emphasize the rupturing force of a millennium they expect will break into normal historical time in an unpredictable, mundanely uncaused manner. Catholicism, by contrast, puts more stress on the historical rupture of Jesus' birth and the coming to be and subsequent continuity of the church. But even in the face of such variation, it is fair to say that almost all forms of Christianity emphasize radical change in one or other dimension of time.

The Christian call for radical change at conversion has registered strongly in early work in the anthropology of Christianity. Those who study Pentecostalism in particular have not been able to ignore the way it fosters a need for converts to, in the words of one of Birgit Meyer's Ghanaian informants, 'make a complete break with' their pasts. Such breaks show up in a variety of forms on the personal, social, and cultural levels. For the Ghanaians that Meyer (1998, 1999) studies, a primary social concern is breaking with one's kin, whose traditional practices open one to demonic possession. In Latin America, by contrast, one finds that converts stress the need for men to leave behind personal practices such as drinking and adultery that are associated with the acquisition of male prestige (Brusco 1995; Burdick 1998). In yet other cases in Latin America, Africa and elsewhere, there is an emphasis on the need for people to open a chasm between themselves and the society around them more generally, leaving behind in particular their strong identification with secular social roles connected with race, class and ethnicity (and in some respects gender as well) (Burdick 1998; Droogers 2001: 45; Freston 1998; Robbins 1998; Van Dijk 1998). While in each of these cases the line separating the convert's new personal and social life from his/her old one is drawn in a different place, all of them share an emphasis on the need to draw such lines—a need for converts to fashion themselves as new kinds of people, different from those they had been before, by marking a discontinuity in their personal histories.

Along with requiring that converts embrace discontinuity in their personal and social lives, Pentecostalism generally calls for discontinuity in the cultural realm as well. As Dombrowski (2001) has put it in his study of Native North American Pentecostals, Pentecostalism is frequently a culture 'against culture'. At issue in the cultural dimension

is not just a change in personal behavior and social affiliations, but also a disavowal of the importance of traditional beliefs and values—a break, as Droogers (2001: 45) puts it, with the ‘dominant culture’. This often takes the form of a rejection of a traditional ritual life aimed at ancestors and other kinds of spirits—a ritual life that in many places did much of the work of setting the moral tone of daily life. Another form this cultural rupture can take is the overthrow of local traditions of historical narrative in favor of new historical sensibilities in which groups situate themselves within the universal Christian rendering of the past. Ancestral figures and local culture heroes fade from the scene as people come to rethink their past in terms of a move from darkness to light. Further, this kind of rupture is often inscribed on the cultured landscape when people deploy ritual practices known as spiritual warfare to entreat God to chase evil traditional spirits from their land and in doing so erase the vestiges of tradition carried by nature spirits and other spirits of place (DeBernardi 1999; Jorgensen 2005; Robbins 2012).

While the Pentecostal stress on rupture exists on the ideological level in the form of a host of cultural models of radical change, it is important to note that it also appears regularly at the level of action. This is so because Pentecostals routinely enact the importance of rupture in ritual practices that make disjuncture a constant theme. We might call these rites ‘rituals of rupture’ (Robbins 2003b: 224). They range from rites of deliverance that work to disconnect people from past relationships (Meyer 1998; Gifford 2004), to the Malawian rituals designed to ‘seal off’ believers from the wider society that Van Dijk (1998) discusses. And, of course, conversion rituals such as baptism are also rituals of rupture (Ruel 1997: 41–42). Finally, and perhaps most prominently today, the rituals of spiritual warfare I mentioned above also qualify as rituals of rupture in their efforts to radically transform the traditional landscapes upon which they are practiced.

In these rituals of rupture, Pentecostals call upon the Holy Spirit to empower them to bring about the discontinuities they seek to effect. This point returns us to the theme of transcendence, for it is the appearance of divine power on earth that converts imagine allows them to bring about radical change toward a wholly different and better life. The fact that the anthropological literature on Pentecostal transformations frequently does attest to converts’ success in fostering transformation by recording dramatic changes not only in religious practices, but also in gender roles, economic behaviors, and moral orientations, indicates the power of such convictions when people use them to guide their actions (Robbins 2010). When carried out in the name of realizing transcendent demands, it seems, people can, as Tuzin (1997: 36) has said of some charismatic converts in Papua New Guinea, take history into their own hands (see also Keane 2007: 56).

The power of Christian models that define change as resulting from an unpredictable in-breaking of transcendent power in the mundane world that guides transformative social action has recently given this religion a surprising visibility among what we might call post- or nearly-post-Marxist philosophers such as Alain Badiou (2003) and Slavoj Žižek (1999, 2003), as well as among other continental philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben (2005). What appeals to them is the way Christianity, particularly in the figure of Saint Paul, provides a model of the nature of radical change that arrives not as the result of now discredited theories of the teleological march of progress, but rather as an event that appears unexpectedly. But even as their vision of Christianity as providing a

paradigm of radical *social* change does fit with the experience of some Pentecostal converts (Robbins 2010), the malleability of Christian treatments of transcendence renders that vision inapplicable to many Christian situations.

The difficulties come out clearly in the work of Bialecki (2009) with middle class, third wave charismatics in Southern California. The Pentecostal groups I have been discussing thus far are those who actively seek regular divine involvement in their earthly lives. The third wave charismatics Bialecki studied—all highly educated middle or upper middle class professionals, or students at elite universities who have good reason to expect to attain these social heights—also believe in the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. But they expect the Holy Spirit to appear less often, and its appearance is less central to their ritual and everyday lives. These charismatics lean politically to the left and they spend a good deal of time talking about social justice issues. But even as their political commitments point in this direction, they have trouble organizing to take political action for change. What holds them back is their belief that real change will have to come from God and take the form of a movement that constitutes an in-breaking of his transcendent power brought by the Holy Spirit. By definition, humans cannot themselves initiate such a movement, for if they do, its origin will not be transcendent. These church-goers therefore find themselves stuck, unable to take action because the very fact of their taking it will invalidate any claims their action might have to transcendent justification. What we see here, in keeping with long-established sociological observations about what happens to charismatic ideas as their carriers ascend the class ladder, is that God's transcendence of the mundane world has become more extreme than it was for the Pentecostals I was discussing earlier, and the Holy Spirit has become a less regular mediator of his power on earth. Concomitantly, the willingness or ability to take action to bring about radical change has also diminished in ways that make Christianity appear a less worthy model for those seeking to understand the nature of revolutionary transformation.

As a second and final comparative point, we might look briefly at how Catholicism handles matters of transcendence and its relationship to change. If Bialecki's third wave charismatics are inclined to stress God's transcendence more than other Pentecostal groups, Catholicism would have to be placed on the side of a greater emphasis on God's predictable immanence. Sacramentalism, Papal authority, and the routinized role of the clergy in mediating divine power all point to the importance of divine immanence in Catholicism. Here God's presence in social life is in many respects understood to be regular and, we might say, mundane—it does not arrive as a transformative shock. This is reflected in a muted emphasis on radical change. We know relatively less, anthropologically speaking, about Catholic conversion than we do about its Pentecostal forms, because most studies of Catholics focus on those who have grown up in the church. But we do know about the Catholic stress on 'inculturation' and the Church's general post-Vatican II acceptance of broad swathes of the traditions of formerly non-Christian converts—a position that values cultural continuity to a much greater extent than the Pentecostal ones we have been examining. We also know, from Lester's (2003) study of Mexican nuns in their first year of training, that Catholics whose religious lives take a dramatic turn—such as deciding to enter the convent—are often encouraged to re-narrate their pasts so as to make their current situation appear as a normal continuation of it, rather than as a radical change.

I am not arguing that Catholicism does not value change at all. Vatican II, for example, itself has some of the hallmarks of the kind of major cultural transformation one more often expects in traditions that emphasize both God's transcendence and his power to break into earthly life as an unexpected transformative force (Greeley 2004). But Catholicism tends not to dwell on the kind of radical change highlighted in Christian traditions focused more squarely on transcendence. Given this, it is of some interest that the Catholic theologian Lieven Boeve has recently proffered the argument that the transcendent relates to the mundane world not by fundamentally rupturing its continuity, but by 'interrupting' its expected development. For Boeve (2008: 203), 'the category of interruption holds continuity and discontinuity together in a tensive relationship. Interruption is after all not identical with rupture, but implies that what is interrupted does not simply continue as though nothing had happened.' Boeve retains a high valuation of continuity, but wants to see it unfold without foreclosing all recognition of change. An interesting future task for anthropologists of Christianity is to explore the dynamics of such interruptive change in social, cultural and personal life and to register its differences from the wholly discontinuous kinds of change so often sought by Protestants and Pentecostals. And, in keeping with my broader argument in this article, we should also engage in further work to correlate both kinds of change with distinctive Christian approaches to the relationship of the transcendent to the mundane.

Christianity and changing language ideologies

The comparative interest in approaches to discontinuity and change shown by anthropologists makes them somewhat unique among the various kinds of scholars that study Christianity. One of the areas in which anthropologists have found radical change to be most marked—and to be most salient for converts themselves—is in people's ideas about language. Work on this topic has grown very rapidly, and it too, I want to argue, can be seen to rest in important respects on issues of the different ways Christians think about the conjunction of the transcendent and the mundane.

In the background of the anthropological interest in Christian ideas about language stands the development by linguistic anthropologists over the last several decades of the notion of 'language ideology' (see Schieffelin et al. 1998). This term refers to people's shared ideas about the nature of language, how it works, and how people should use it. Language ideologies turn out to vary greatly between groups, and they form crucial components of people's views not only of communication, but also of personhood, action, and morality. For these reasons, language ideologies have proven to be an enormously rich area of study, and interest in them has quickly moved beyond technically inclined linguistic anthropology circles. One might even say that the notion of language ideology has been one of the most successful recent theoretical product launches within anthropology as a whole.

Anthropologists of Christianity have been early adopters of language ideology as a field of study. This makes good sense, for Protestant Christianity in particular—the kind of Christianity anthropologists most often study—is largely a religion of language. Firmly opposed to patterned ritual action, at least in its own self-understanding, Protestantism

focuses on the reception and production of written and spoken language. It does so, for example, in the central place that its model of the ideal Christian life gives to bible reading, sermon performance and audition, prayer, and the currently popular discussion practices known as ‘bible study’. But what has made language ideology so interesting for those who study Protestant Christianity is not simply that tradition’s strong emphasis on the importance of linguistic practices for religious life, but also its distinctive approach to understanding language.

Keane (2007), who has done extensive work on Protestant language ideology, has shown that it is grounded in notions of sincerity—the moral demand that people speak honestly at all times about the thoughts and feelings that are inside of them. This injunction to sincerity is correlated with a relative disregard for the material and social features of language such as the sounds of words or the conventions that govern how and when things get said or heard. Instead of emphasizing such material and social factors that impinge upon the functioning of language, Protestants attend to the immaterial ‘meanings’ such material and social factors are understood simply to help carry between people. In the Protestant model, sincere speakers are supposed to endeavor to convey with full accuracy their immaterial thoughts and feelings. Their intentions in this regard create the meanings of their speech, as opposed to such meanings being created by the material and conventional forms in which speakers have to ‘package’ them. But the danger always lurks that people will find themselves captured by these material forms—the sounds, routines and conventions of speech—and will thus fall short of speaking sincerely. On Keane’s account, this has meant that Protestant language ideology strongly promotes the need for people to emancipate themselves from the snares of the material and social worlds that surround them in order to realize true Christian personhood and express it through sincere speech.

The basic outlines of Protestant language ideology often sound quite familiar to academics. This is because they have also provided much of the foundation for modern Western language ideology more generally—an ideology also focused on sincerity and the reliability of material and social conventions as vehicles for the transmission of intended meanings (Robbins 2001; Keane 2002, 2007). Given the ubiquity of this kind of language ideology in scholarly circles, it can be easy for us to forget how unusual it can look to those socialized into understandings of language quite different from this modern Western one. For people in many societies, and in Western Europe prior to the Reformation, the goal of a speaker was not to convey sincerely his or her thoughts or feelings, but rather to show deference to his or her interlocutor by employing appropriate forms of politeness. In other places, verbal artistry—a play with the sounds and conventional forms of language—is valued over conveying intended meanings. And finally, in some places, speech as a whole is devalued as an unreliable mode of communication, and other modes, such as the exchange of material goods, are understood to do the communicative work Protestant language ideology demands of sincere speech.

Anthropologists have found that converts who come to Protestantism from backgrounds in which they have been socialized into other language ideologies frequently find it difficult to fully inhabit the new language ideology that conversion brings to them. A good deal of work on this has been done in Papua New Guinea. The struggle to take up Protestant language ideology there has been particularly marked because in many of the cultures

of the region traditional language ideologies were almost direct inversions of it. Many people in Papua New Guinea assert that it is impossible to know what another person thinks or feels. One cannot see into the mind of another, and language cannot reliably convey information about what goes on there. For this reason, speech is thought to be of little value when it comes to establishing an understanding of the state of the social world. Speech can be entertaining, and eloquent, highly metaphoric speech that can move a listener is widely appreciated, but there is no expectation that a person might even be capable of speaking sincerely or should be understood to be trying to do so. The kinds of social truths about how people think and feel that Protestants and modern speakers more generally construct from speech, people in Papua New Guinea tend to construct through exchange. Once they convert to Protestant forms of Christianity, however, Papua New Guineans find themselves needing to learn to become sincere speakers, and to interpret others as speaking sincerely. I have elsewhere taken up in detail how one Papua New Guinean group, the Urapmin, has endeavored to achieve this goal by developing a number of Christian rituals in which participants are helped by the Holy Spirit and by God to speak sincerely (Robbins 2008). Schieffelin (2008) has also detailed the similar struggles of the Bosavi to accommodate themselves to Christian ideas about language, and only slightly further afield Keane's (2007) work on Sumba takes up related themes.

Research on the difficulties converts face in becoming sincere Christian speakers has become so popular that work in this vein has already begun to take on an air of normal science. In order to prevent analyses from becoming too pat, one important next step would be to begin to differentiate between versions of Christian language ideology. In order to sketch how this might be done, I want to return to my overall theme and suggest that attention to how different kinds of Christianity articulate the relationship of the transcendent and the mundane can help with this project.

I start this discussion with Keane's (2007: 65–67) observation that among Dutch Calvinists God's transcendence is so absolute that he cannot find expression in earthly material signs. This sets up the expectation that God's followers will similarly identify their own personhood with immaterial meanings and value these over material forms of linguistic expression (2007: 67). This immaterial/material or spirit/flesh binary in turn supports the stringent Calvinist demand for sincerity, in which immaterial, spiritual meanings are conveyed wholly without material distortion. For such Calvinists, the most benighted of human beings are pagans and Catholics who put too much stock in immanence, attaching themselves to material forms such as idols or fixed ritual patterns of speaking and acting thought to house the divine on earth. And these Calvinist critics are not wholly wrong in seeing Catholics at least as engaged in a different project than their own. In an important recent paper, Mafra (2011) has refined our sense of the Catholic investment in immanence by counterposing a Catholic ideology of saintliness to the Protestant one of sincerity. In the model of saintliness, the Christian's goal is to make contact with sacred power not by finding it in their innermost self, but by participating in earthly 'material' forms such as fixed prayers that embody it. Mafra's work provides us good material for sketching an argument whereby it is varying approaches to transcendence that set up the differences in language ideologies among different kinds of Christians.

If such an argument opposes Protestant transcendence and sincerity to Catholic immanence and saintliness, where might one place Pentecostalism? A short answer

would see it as straddling both sides of this divide. On the one hand, it is not difficult to find Pentecostals expressing the need for subjects to speak sincerely. The value they place on spontaneous, heartfelt expression as the only kind worth producing attests to this. Yet on the other hand, their claims that the Holy Spirit sometimes speaks through them in tongues, prophecy, and other forms of charismatic expression also indicate an openness to divine immanence and a willingness to let it override the highly controlled verbal production of the sincere speaker. One might speculate that this flexibility in Pentecostalism is part of its appeal in much of the global south, as it offers training in the logic and the practice of some of the key tenets of modern language ideology while also providing access to the kind of immanent divine speech that other contemporary forms of Christianity tend to define as unavailable. We will see Pentecostals once again attempting to balance commitments to both transcendence and immanence when we turn to the final focal topic of this article—individualism.

Christianity and individualism

I have left myself little space to discuss Christianity's ability to foster individualism among its converts. But perhaps this is appropriate, since the idea that Christianity and individualism are related is far more widely known than those about Christianity and change and Christianity and language that I discussed above. And within anthropology itself, Dumont (1986) provided a well-known account of the crucial role Christianity played in the development of individualism in the West long before anthropologists began to study Christianity more generally.

Of course, individualism is not a concept with a single definition, and anthropologists use it in different ways in discussing Christianity. All usages, however, share a focus on the ways people come to be understood as disembedded from some or all of their social relations. What varies across different kinds of Christianity are the relations believers hope to leave behind, and how they attempt to disembed themselves from them. As is the case with language ideologies, beginning to specify the different kinds of individualism promoted by different kinds of Christianity is an important next step for the anthropology of Christianity, and one way to do this is to correlate kinds of Christian individualism with different approaches to the relationship of the transcendent to the mundane.

Let me start on this task by quickly sketching some of the varieties of Christian individualism found in the anthropological literature. We have already encountered one kind of Protestant individualism in Keane's discussion of the sincere Calvinist speaker. This speaker, who makes meaning completely on his or her own, and who is responsible for all that he or she says, is one of the most fully disembedded kinds of individual—ideally dependent on no one else and no social forms for the meanings of their utterances and actions. Other versions of Christian individualism focus less on speech than on other aspects of human life. Surveying the literature on African Pentecostalism, Meyer (2004: 261) has seen the cutting of kinship ties in rituals of deliverance designed to heal people of possession by ancestral demons or by demons that have been summoned by their unconverted relatives as 'a symbolic creation of the modern individual subject', and many other anthropologists have stressed how such efforts to disembed the individual from

extended family networks make good individualist sense for urban migrants trying to succeed in the capitalist market economy. In my work in Papua New Guinea among the Urapmin, a group of rural charismatic subsistence farmers with little market engagement, I found that individualism expressed itself most fully in an imagined economy of salvation. Urapmin understand that in this economy each person is responsible for saving him or herself. Salvation cannot be shared between friends or among family members. As one eloquent leader put it, 'my wife can't break off part of her belief and give it to me' (Robbins 2004: Chapter 8). Urapmin recognize they live out their social lives connected with others, but also assert that these connections will play no role in determining whether or not a person is saved.

A key question in examining these many expressions of individualism is how Christianity makes them coherent and inhabitable. For converts who do not live wholly immersed in the market economy, the assumption of the autonomous individual sits only very awkwardly with their sense of how they actually live their social lives. As is the case with the Urapmin, they are forced to imagine that their salvation depends upon a very different understanding of the person than is presumed in everyday action. I would suggest that it is the Christian investment in transcendence that makes such imaginings of another kind of living possible. Christian individualism is based upon the idea that it is in the human person that the transcendent most fully reveals itself in the mundane world. In some cases, such as the Calvinist one, the otherness and force of the transcendent is such that it aims to completely disavow the value of the mundane body in which, as spirit, it is housed on earth. Among Pentecostals, for whom the transcendent tends to infuse rather than wholly reject the mundane, individualism is less austere—and people not only assert their separation from others—breaking kin links, working on personal salvation—but sometimes also stress their spirit-mediated connections to one another through such charisms as healing and prophesying. And in Catholicism, with its high valuation of the mundane world as an arena of divine presence, individualism can be quite muted, overshadowed at least much of the time by people's commitment to the collective institution of the church. But inasmuch as spirit is ultimately valued over matter—the transcendent over the mundane—the individual is in all these forms of Christianity ultimately the bearer of the potentially highest value—that of salvation. Realizing such individualism in one of its several forms is how the axial project becomes imaginable for Christian converts—it is how they struggle to make the transcendent relevant to their earthly lives.

Conclusion

I began this article by drawing your attention to Westermarck's observation that Christianity posits a transcendent or ideal moral world that is quite different from the normal human one. In a move Westermarck is often accused of making, I blithely removed this observation of his from the context of the argument within which it was most meaningful to him. I have not been interested, that is to say, in following him by making this point the cornerstone of a critique of Christianity for the unreasonableness of its moral doctrines and the harmful effects on human society they have had. Instead, my goal has been to

use Westermarck's insight as a foundation for exploring the possibility of organizing a discussion of some of the key topics in the emerging anthropology of Christianity around a consideration of how different Christian groups negotiate the relationship between the transcendent and the mundane. Looking at what anthropologists have discovered about variation in Christian approaches to change, language, and individualism, I have operated on the hypothesis that differences in the transcendent/mundane relationship can do much to account for the range of this variation. In taking this tack, my argument has aimed to say something new within the anthropology of Christianity by developing some scattered ideas that can be found in the literature as it has developed to this point.

But perhaps there is also a point of more general social scientific significance in this exercise. For I have also hoped to demonstrate the powerful role ideas about transcendence can play in the unfolding of the cultural formations of which they are a part. In driving toward this point, I have borrowed from the axial age theorists the claim that the existence in any given culture of representations of a radically different and better world beyond this one profoundly shapes the lives its members lead. And perhaps there is no society in which people are completely immune from feeling the pull of the ideal in some way or another, even if in some cultures people do not house the ideal in an elaborately imagined transcendent realm. We might recall at this point that Lévi-Strauss even charged Westermarck with falling under the sway of the hope for a world that was better than the one he inhabited and studied. As Lévi-Strauss (1982: 192) put it, 'for Westermarck, the role of sociology was not to justify what was, nor what is, but to construct what ought to be'. And Westermarck himself, immediately after condemning Christianity for sternly commanding that people realize 'the highest moral ideal' in the passage I quoted earlier, goes on to note that 'far above the anxious effort to fulfill the commandments of duty stands the free and lofty aspiration to live up to an ideal, which, unattainable as it may be, threatens neither with blame nor remorse him who fails to reach its summits' (1969 [1939]: 401). Once we start distinguishing, as Westermarck does here, between the ideal as carrot and the ideal as stick, we are already deeply involved in the comparative study of the way the transcendent and the ideal find their place in human society. I hope one of the broader ideas my article has put across is, as Westermarck in his own roundabout way foreshadowed, that the social life of the transcendent is an area that is ripe for further anthropological investigation.

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NOTE

¹ Wagner (2005: 89) and Eisenstadt (2005: 532) both acknowledge that axial age theory can be read as developing both typological and historical arguments, and that the typological arguments can be disembedded from the historical ones.

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JOEL ROBBINS
PROFESSOR
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

JANE AND AATOS ERKKO VISITING PROFESSOR IN STUDIES
ON CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY
HELSINKI COLLEGIUM FOR ADVANCED STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
jrobbins@dss.ucsd.edu