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ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE MISSIONS: A CRITICAL EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE*

by

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1. Introduction

The attempt to clarify the touchy relationship between anthropology and missionary work is not easy: many a discussion still appears to run into polemics and mutual recrimination. It seems that somewhat more fundamental debates on the relationship between these two branches of activity in non-western countries are avoided¹ (although empirical research on missionaries and their influence seems to take off in recent years; see the important study of Beidelman).²

Perhaps this is out of respect for the good work that many missionaries (undoubtedly) have done or still do; or because of the persistent belief that, if missionary work or missiology may perhaps be said to import foreign, non-indigenous values into other cultures, anthropology in the end does the same thing; and perhaps the fact that in the field anthropologists are often dependent on the goodwill and support of missionaries plays a role as well.

Further commenting on the second point here, it is true that anthropology has, in some respects, of course to be seen in the context of its

- * Opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of the Editor.
1. Cf. for example the provocative article of C. Stipe, "Anthropologists versus Missionaries: the influence of presuppositions", in: *Current Anthropology*, 1980, 21, pp. 165-168.
 2. T.O. Beidelman, *Colonial Evangelism: a socio-historical study of an East African Mission at the grassroots*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.

western pedigree — it has sometimes assumed some imperialist characteristics, 'constituting' its research objects from an external, utilitarian vantage point, and not on a shared level of analysis and commitment with the subjects studied. But I will argue here that anthropology is on a more fundamentally different level with regard to human praxis than missiology and missionary work, and that it is time that this point is fully recognized.

There is a regrettable tendency to obfuscate the basic difference between anthropology (in its research and its applied form) and missionary work as forms of human (i.e. western) activity in or vis-à-vis non-western, traditional societies: the latter as unabashed commitment and imposition of absolutist values, the former more modest, tentative and self-critical, aimed at more knowledge and understanding. In this paper, I want to focus especially on the issue of the 'value commitment' of the respective proponents of anthropology and the missions, and on their 'rationality', linking the debate to a point in epistemology.

A recent contribution to the debate is the article of C. Stipe,³ which will be used as a stepping stone for the argument in the present paper, which I intend constituting a critique of missiology as a form of ideological discourse.

2. *The different perspectives of anthropology and missionary work*

It may be obvious that the goals and characteristics of anthropology and missionary work, as activities often directed to the same field of subjects or objects of study, differ in an explicit manner. Anthropology is by definition more detached, trying first to obtain knowledge and/or explanations on sociocultural phenomena and human behavior; to effect change is secondary or not at all desired. Missionary work (supported by the purported scientific basis of missiology) tries to induce rather far-reaching religious and social change among non-Christian, traditional, often non-literate, people. Its practitioners do this in their sincere conviction that the people missionized deserve a more positive spiritual development (cf. various articles in Smalley 1967, also

³ Stipe, *ibid.*

Trueblood 1972, Verkuyl 1978⁴). This is a point where anthropologists are at issue with missionaries, being the scepticists-relativists they are (see later): the missionary stance is seen as blatant 'applied ethnocentrism'. Anthropologists wonder why missionaries think they are entitled to deliberately interfere with non-Christian societies in order to recreate them in a Christian way. Since Frazer and Durkheim most anthropologists are of a different opinion.

This, for anthropologists, vexingly normative point of view of the missionaries time and again evoked practical problems in the field as well as theoretical discussions on their mutual achievements and tasks (although it seems that those discussions have never really straightened out things; see for some recent articles Hiebert 1978, Beidelman 1974, Salamone 1977).⁵

The following issues strike me as still central in the ongoing debate to which clear answers have not yet been given, especially not by the missionaries:

- May one interfere uninvited with other cultures of which one has relatively poor knowledge, without creating unnecessary conflict and confusion? Is anthropology here not less 'guilty' than missionary work? Can one accept the Christian 'urge to missionize'⁶ simply as legitimate?
- Do the supposed positive contributions of missionary work outweigh the negative ones?
- How can one really 'translate' one's own values, concepts and ideas in those of other cultures?
- Must we work towards cooperation and 'division of labor' between anthropologists and missionaries, and if so, how?

4. W. Smalley, Ed., *Readings in Missionary Anthropology*, Tarrytown, N.Y.: Practical Anthropology, 1967; E. Trueblood, *The Validity of the Christian Mission*, New York: Harper and Row, 1972 and J. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology. An Introduction*, Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1978.

5. P. Hiebert, 'Missions and anthropology: a love/hate relationship', in: *Missiology*, 1978, 6, pp. 165-180; T.O. Beidelman, 'Social theory and the study of Christian missions in Africa', in: *Africa*, 1974, 44, pp. 235-249, and F.A. Salamone, 'Anthropologists and missionaries: competition or reciprocity?', in: *Human Organization*, 1977, 36, pp. 407-412.

6. See Trueblood, *ibid.*, *passim*.

– Is the source of the fairly frequent mutual hostility a question of personality, of academic socialization, or of discipline?

The article of C. Stipe (1980) can in several ways be considered as an interesting recent contribution to the discussion of these questions. His article gives us an opportunity to enlarge upon a more fundamental issue underlying this troubled relationship between anthropology and the missions. Contrary to what Stipe asserts it is not only a problem of the personal psychology of the anthropologists, but has to do with the status, form and use of value commitment of missionaries and anthropologists *vis-à-vis* other cultures, as remarked in the Introduction. One general point of departure for the discussion may be the need to abstain as much as possible from any *a priori* values or beliefs as axioms for evaluation of human behavior or cultures in intercultural communication. The same may be said of the communication or reception of knowledge of the non-western societies or cultures where both anthropologists and missionaries are active. From the outset mutual openheartedness and respect are a condition *sine qua non*, especially during cooperative ventures of any kind in a post colonial area. It is a truism to say that there is no such thing as a value-free science or that 'value-free' is an ideological notion known to every scientist. This is only true to a certain extent. It does not refute the desirability of arguing in as value-free a manner as possible while presenting the results of research. My rationalist point of view is here that we, as human beings wishing to comprehend and acquire respect for people of other cultures before judging them, never have to fall back prematurely to a 'retreat to commitment'⁷: this is not logically entailed by the view that absolute, value-free science or communication is impossible. I fear that this essentially excludes 'missiology' from the scientific debate, because of its explicit basis of value commitment (i.e. to understand missionaries and their methods, and the people to be missionized, in order to facilitate their eventual conversion).

Missionaries do consciously make the step to commitment and ground their approach to other, non-Christian peoples in a normative frame-

7. See W.W. Bartley, III, *The Retreat to Commitment*, New York: A. Knopf, 1962.

work ultimately deemed superior, although there is no intrinsic reason to do so.

If one objects that missionaries have completely different goals than anthropologists, this can be admitted, but this means at the same time that: a) they in fact admit to being a kind of 'applied ethnocentrists' and that they are in danger of being called *spiritual or cultural imperialists* (which often has happened in Third World countries⁸; b) for missionaries, increase of knowledge, better understanding and respectful, equal treatment of people of other cultures is in fact not of primary importance. We see this reflected in the words of W. Merrifield, director of the controversial Summer Institute of Linguistics (which is critically evaluated in Hvalkof's and Aaby's book.⁹ He admitted that, despite the scientific-linguistic work of the members of the Institute, translation of the Bible in native vernaculars and the distribution of its message, was their 'underlying motive', in accordance with the injunctions of the Christian Bible itself. The Christian conviction 'obliges' him and his colleagues to be concerned about the members of primitive cultures who do not yet know Christianity.¹⁰

The goal of the missionaries is thus incommensurable with that of the anthropologists, who are much more modest and take the tentative exploration of cultural and social differences as prime concern, eventually (and increasingly) discussing their implications in a dialogue with members of the societies studied. In this respect anthropology has advanced significantly in the last few decades.

It is therefore a bit too simple to state that anthropologists and missionaries operate in two different domains which can be held separate, one being as legitimate as the other, and that mutual tolerance would be the only correct attitude.¹¹ This will not solve the problem of the recurring irritation and hostility.

8. See Trueblood, *ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

9. S. Hvalkof and P. Aaby, Eds., *Is God an American? An anthropological perspective on the work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics*, London-Copenhagen: Survival International-IWGIA, 1981.

10. See J. Benthall, 'The Summer Institute of Linguistics', in: *Royal Anthropological Institute News*, 9, pp. 1-5.

11. Compare F. Salamone, *ibid.*

3. *The attitude of anthropologists toward the missions*

The relationship between anthropologists and missionaries must be examined carefully in order to explain this strain. Stipe (1980), who can be said to be well disposed towards the missionary point of view, does not question the legitimacy of the two spheres and looks into the source of the negative attitude of anthropologists versus missionaries. He states that 1. anthropologists when being educated hear above all negative judgments and opinions in regard to missionaries; 2. anthropologists express sometimes presuppositions which cloud a good view of the missionaries. Both points need some consideration in addition.

1. In a rather bold statement, Stipe asserts that: "Even though there seems to be little systematic indoctrination, early in their training anthropology students learn that missionaries are to be regarded as 'enemies'." ¹² but he does not subsequently ask himself whether there would eventually be any *reason* for anthropologists being sceptical about missionaries. He implies that there should be no reason at all. But I think that there may be some historical reasons for the ambivalent attitude of anthropologists towards missionary work. Perhaps it is not necessary to give here a description of what missionizing in practice often meant to traditional cultures; but it has to be recognized that its effects have often been less blissful than many persons want us to believe. We cannot close our eyes for the fact that missionizing was often closely associated with 'the brute force' of western economic and political penetration; often constituted an instrument of colonization; caused confusion and tragic splits in native populations as well as social and identity crises, due to its speedy and forced imposition of behavioral change. In many cases, missionizing was characterized by opportunism, expanding its influence in the shadow of white political and colonial dominance. Frequently missionaries did not know how to bridge the contradictions between the morals that they preached and the morals in practice (i.e. of the white traders, soldiers or administrators). Missionaries came without being invited and often stayed on even when their visit was not appreciated and when their words and intentions were rejected. In this context we can ask ourselves what would happen when

12. Stipe, *ibid.*, p. 165.

missionaries should chance to find a religious tradition with elements of their own Christian belief, e.g. monotheistic, with comparable ethical standards and a universalist scope? Even then they would push on, because their specific religious outlook tells them to. A case in point is perhaps Ethiopia, where a large part of the population was already Christian for ages, when missionaries (first Catholics, later Protestants) came with the intention to 'reform' ritual and dogma and to expand the faith, in order to make the Ethiopians 'true believers'. This exasperated the kings and the population more than once. In 1874 king Yohannis IV at one time shouted to the missionaries, who claimed to have the true Scriptures and commentaries, that he was 'sick of their books', and tried to get rid of them. ¹³

In the same way the Falashas of Ethiopia, among whom the German missionary J.M. Flad worked, were satisfied with their own religion, knew what Christianity stood for and answered him: "We don't want to believe in Jesus or to become Christian, therefore we don't want to see you again. We remain what our fathers where. . ." ¹⁴

One may also recognize a certain cynical aspect of missionary work, viz. when presenting itself as a moral factor to neutralize the more negative aspects of western civilization. This unavoidably leads to misplaced paternalism. For many missionaries, the positive aim was to integrate Christianity into the religious structure and the religious values of the traditional societies they encountered. Western world civilization in its 'crude, material-technological form', was, in the words of one missionary-anthropologist, aimed at expanding the 'external inventory' and at elevating the 'purely material standard of living of the individual'. ¹⁵ Rescuing cultural values is for him then made dependent on the effective transmission of the true Christian religion in a world of materialism and decay (by proceeding secularization, indifference, etc.). This view may be valid for some people, but not for all; and the leap to an all-embracing faith may, for some, be the solution, but it is not for us

13. See J.M. Flad, *Sechzig Jahre in der Mission unter den Falaschas in Abessinien*, Giessen: Brunnen Verlag, 1922, p. 352.

14. Flad, *ibid.*, p. 359; my translation, J.A.

15. R. Mohr, *Missionsethnologie. Ein wissenschaftliches Programm*, Nijmegen: Dekker en van de Vegt, 1956.

westerners to prescribe this for others. A critical dialogue and an enlarging of the possibilities for choice and communication between people of different cultures trying to come to terms with the problems of life is to be lauded, but an imposition of values and metaphysical dogmas is not. Even the most recent contributions in periodicals such as *Missiology* still are dominated by the latter tendency.

Still, one frequently hears positive facts about the missions; and it would be absurd indeed to deny their grand historical role and the meaningful contributions they have made. Many missionaries were sincere, concerned persons, who were also able to extend material, medical and educational assistance to people in need. They also played an important role in, for example, the combat against slavery in the 19th century.¹⁶ In many cases they were for traditional peoples the first whites who really stood in contact with them, lived among them and tried to understand and defend them. But unfortunately they often did this for the wrong reasons and with ulterior motives, redundant to the good work itself. We also often meet the claim that missionaries have made positive contributions to ethnology and that without their work, many facts would have remained unknown (the work of Henry Junod on the Tsonga is often mentioned). This is quite true; but everything they produced they produced as ethnographers; i.e. they did not have to be missionaries for that. In other words, it is pure coincidence that they also gathered ethnographically relevant material; their religious calling had not brought them to foreign countries for that.

In this as on other points in the discussion on the relationship between anthropology and the missions, the fundamental issue remains that of the *attitude* towards value commitment. Stipe suggests that the problem is the same for both anthropologists and missionaries: ". . . it is now generally accepted that the concept of an 'objective observer' who does not let personal values influence observations and conclusions is a myth . . . Presuppositions influence the way in which we look at situations."¹⁷ But how different is the issue handled by each camp! Anthropology tries

16. See E. Kendall, *The End of an Era. Africa and the missionary*, London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1978, p. 26.

17. Stipe, *ibid.*, p. 166.

to put aside value orientations during the research process itself, defines them clearly or puts them to the test. Its practitioners do not – compared with missionaries – try to change people with a conscious policy and an underlying attitude of spiritual superiority. If they do – which of course happens – they are much more the target of criticism than missionaries. If anthropologists take their science seriously, they try to keep the results of their research open to criticism and amendment, in order to advance knowledge and to further understanding, or to make clear what practical policy choices – if these have to be made – would entail. Thus, *criticizability* is largely instituted in anthropology as a science. The underlying values of the practitioners themselves are also the object of scrutiny.

2. The two incorrect ideas that anthropologists have and which influence their attitude toward missionaries are according to Stipe¹⁸ the conceptualization of primitive cultures as 'organic unities', and the view that religious beliefs are essentially meaningless.

On the first point, I have not much to add to what various commentators on Stipe's paper in *Current Anthropology* (like Grottanelli or Feldman¹⁹) have already said. Few anthropologists in the second half of the 20th century would indeed adhere to the view ascribed to them by Stipe. The discussions on functionalism as a theoretical perspective have ended a long time ago with the recognition that processes of change and social dynamics should not and cannot be neglected, although they indeed differ in pace and intensity among the different types of society. Feldman has rightly remarked that the greater amount of integration in traditional societies is often no illusion – in these societies the various social segments are more mutually dependent, due to small scale and less structural differentiation; and the individual has a relatively closer bond with them.

Not only is the second 'presupposition' noted by Stipe unconvincing, it is probably entirely misplaced. If anthropologists think that religious beliefs in general are meaningless, how is it to be explained that much of

18. Stipe, *ibid.*

19. V. Grottanelli, 'Comment', in: *Current Anthropology*, 1980, 21, pp. 169-170; H. Feldman, 'Further thoughts on anthropologists and missionaries', in: *Current Anthropology*, 22, 1981, pp. 297-298.

the best work in the anthropology of religion, as to theory formation, as well as to empirical studies has come from the atheists or agnostics among them? If the argument is meant to convey that anthropologists give the world religions less than their 'due amount' of meaning, it is correct: these religions should be treated with the same anthropological methods of analysis as any tribal or traditional religion. But Stipe means that, because anthropologists do not attach much importance to religion in their own lives, they are apt to underestimate its role and function in the lives of other people, even to misinterpret it. This is very doubtful, as the works of anthropologists like Geertz, Horton, Spiro, Firth, Radin, and many others may attest. Furthermore, the issue is *not* to explain the attitude of anthropologists on religion from their *personal* beliefs or psychological make-up. Stipe himself says in a footnote:²⁰ ". . . one does not have to be religious to believe in the existence of supernaturals to take the position that religious beliefs are very important". Indeed, but this position entails quite something else for anthropologists than for missionaries: the former do not make the premature jump to religious metaphysics and the supernatural; the latter do, because they see it as inescapable, even as an obligation.

We may conclude that anthropologists and missionaries have a fundamentally different, epistemologically grounded view of religion as a human and cultural phenomenon, and the position seems to be much more vulnerable to criticism than that of the anthropologists. The latter have for instance more eye for the connection of religion with other sectors of culture. Especially among so-called 'neo-Tylorian' or 'intellectualist' anthropologists of religion (like e.g. Horton; see also Guthrie),²¹ looking primarily at beliefs and not at ritual, religious beliefs are taken seriously indeed (in this respect, Stipe's claim that the Radcliffe-Brownian idea of 'study the ritual, not the belief' is still followed in anthropology, is doubtful).

Anthropologists have no high esteem for the tacit religious absolutism of the missions. With more justification it could be said in turn that it is

20. Stipe, *ibid.*, p. 167.

21. R. Horton, 'Neo-Tylorianism: sound sense or sinister prejudice?', in: *Man* (N.S.), 3, 1968, pp. 625-634; S. Guthrie, 'A cognitive theory of religion', in: *Current Anthropology* 1980, 21, pp. 181-194.

missionaries themselves who see religious beliefs of indigenous peoples as meaningless: in relation to their own beliefs.

4. Clarification of the problem

To bring the problem of this tenuous relationship nearer to a solution, it might be interesting to present in detail one of the core issues dividing the two camps. A good starting point is provided by B. Delfendahl's comment²²: ". . . a missionary, as such, invites himself to teach mankind, convinced that he is endowed with that others lack and that it is his mission to convert them to it . . . The anthropologist as such, goes to learn *from* mankind. The two attitudes are essentially opposed, even though, in individuals, they may be mingled. Of the two it is rather the anthropological than the missionary attitude which leaves the door open to mutual influence or exchange . . . The missionary attitude implies a one way flow and in extreme cases, unilateral imposition."

What is the origin of the force missionary represents, and from which is derived its supreme authority and right of say? The answer is: God, and the transcendental, revealed, universalist belief in the message of Christ.²³

E. Trueblood, another Christian author, equates being a Christian with being a missionary.²⁴

The Christian attitude of faith and belief in its essentially immutable character, valid for all people and all places can, in my opinion, be seen as *one* specific answer to the basic philosophic problem of the diversity of cultures, customs, moral values and standards, and the longing for the experience of a Universe that makes sense. This is a problem which the philosopher E. Topitsch has called:²⁵ "the value irrationality of the world process" (= "Die Wertirrationalität des Weltgeschehens"), which seems to demand of everyone a metaphysical stand. To adopt — when being confronted with the bewildering variety in human thought, belief and behavior — the Christian faith, is of course a subjective leap of

22. B. Delfendahl, 'On anthropologists versus missionaries', in: *Current Anthropology*, 1981, 22, p. 89.

23. Kendall, *ibid.*, p. 10.

24. Trueblood, *ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

25. E. Topitsch, *Vom Ursprung und Ende der Metaphysik*, München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1958.

faith, a *non sequitur* to a very basic and essential problem. It may attract some people, but certainly cannot provide all of us with a satisfying philosophical or cosmological outlook. *A fortiori*, this means that other people are entitled to take notice of the existence of more than one option except for the Christian. Furthermore, to import belief here as mediating tool in communication and contact with those of others, is an illogical assumption to which most anthropologists, as anthropologists, will object. It opens the door for dogma, for religious and moral absolutism, which in the end leaves no room for traditional beliefs and values of other societies, and prevents their developing these in their own way. Feldman²⁶ has noted the same point: "Christian dogma insists that at some point one must abandon reason and entirely rely upon faith. Fieldworkers, as scientists and rationalists, find this doctrine obnoxious." But the missionary position is then that, in the end anthropologists are also committed to a leap of faith (and that their scepticism and relativism is unjustified and even inconsequential²⁷). The answer of Stipe²⁸ to the above reproach is that ". . . rationalists (among them he counts the non-religious anthropologists, J.A.) also rely on faith in believing that there is a naturalist explanation for everything." This is a version of the so-called *Tu quoque argument*, widely discussed in philosophical debates a few years ago. It is defined by philosopher J. Agassi²⁹ as follows: "Tu quoque, says the irrationalist to the rationalist, you likewise have made a leap of faith, in your very jump to commit yourself to the life of reason; for prior to your becoming a rationalist you had no reason to become one. Hence, your central choice was as irrational as mine." This argument has been for a long time a serious challenge to rationalists. But let alone that choosing a rationalist and ethical point of view will be preferred to an irrationalist one as being

26. Feldman, *ibid.*, p. 298.

27. Cf. Merrifield in his talk with Benthall (Benthall, *ibid.*, p. 5). He remarks: "It's our society who are the sceptics, who reject supernatural influences in our lives . . ." And: "We will continue to insist on certain theological points which, in our view, are the heart of the Christian message. We realize that some intellectuals may think we are naive for taking the Bible at face value, but we can live with that."

28. C. Stipe, 'Reply', in: *Current Anthropology*, 1980, 22, p. 298.

29. J. Agassi, "Rationality and the Tu Quoque argument", in: *Inquiry*, 1973, 16, pp. 395-406.

unbiased, a rationalist answer has been provided for by W. Bartley.³⁰ This answer essentially implies that if we try to come to more knowledge on, and better understanding of other cultures, there is no logical reason why we should *not* cling to a rationalist viewpoint in order to hold open the possibility of explaining events and phenomena in a naturalist way. Bartley in effect asserts that this rationalist position can be rationally defended, if we define it not in the sense of being justifiable, but in the sense of being criticizable, that is subject to criticism with the possibility of being refuted, including the principle of using reason *itself*. This argument works on the assumption that both missionaries and anthropologists intend to understand, explain and improve the social and religious life of the traditional peoples among whom they work; that is to say they would want to further the latter's self-knowledge and to create the possibility improve themselves with new knowledge about them (although of course anthropologists more so than missionaries). This almost universally accepted, tacit presupposition of cognitive advancement makes rationalism a logical obligation in the social sciences as well, because it means *suspending* any ill-founded beliefs of a religious or 'historicist' nature as guidelines for policy, research, etc. If we further apply this viewpoint to the relation between anthropology and missionary work, we see that the latter falls short of the standard: for missionaries there is an unquestionable scale of values, with clear, unambiguous ideas and norms couched in a religious framework which for them can only be *true*. Thus, viewed in this context of transcultural communication and problem-solving, the Christian missionary viewpoint is ultimately a one-sided, ethnocentric form of discourse. Compared with this, anthropologists – if they are conscious of the epistemological status of their science as a rational enterprise offering

30. Bartley, *ibid.*, and: 'Rationality versus the theory of rationality', in: M. Bunge, Ed., *The Critical Approach to Science and Philosophy*, New York-London: Free Press-Collier MacMillan, pp. 3-31, 1964. The philosophical debate which has followed upon Bartley's publications (e.g. in *Philosophy*), centered on the question of whether his solution is rationally tenable, will not be treated here. It is sufficient to conclude that this solution is still more attractive than any other to date, because it is still capable of being refuted with critical argument. See also: W.W. Bartley, III, 'On the criticizability of logic – a reply to A.A. Derksen', in: *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 1980, 10, pp. 67-77.

tentative, falsifiable descriptions, theories and explanations – remain much more free of this. They are, as a rule, more modest; they can not only keep their results and conclusions, but also their rational method *itself* open to criticism, until a better one can be offered (which has not occurred yet).³¹ In this way they can suspend judgements based on metaphysical and religious values. In other words, the missions are committed to particular values which are not *a priori* valid for everyone and every culture; anthropology puts values to the test, offering at the same time a better way to argue, in a real dialogue, about this problem. Unfortunately, a missionary attitude in practice often inhibits free discussion and growth of knowledge, and often prevents traditional cultures from clearly and openly facing the many problems that the modern age poses: social and economic change, cultural identity, contact with a technologically advanced culture, etc.³²

In sum, the accusation of missionary-minded persons that anthropologists also make an irrational choice (for rationalism) which they purportedly embrace with a leap of faith, is therefore not valid. The two positions are logically not on the same line. The aspect of the problem has not been sufficiently emphasized.

5. Background of the problem

As we noticed earlier, missionaries implicitly claim to have an answer to the problem of the diversity of cultures and moral standards, while they see the anthropologists as being unreflecting relativists who introduce their own values after all. It is true that frequently anthropologists are not aware of this problem. In a debate with the missionary-minded it is important that they should not fall into the trap of relativism, which seems to have lingered on surprisingly long in anthropology.³³

We have to realize that not (being capable of) accepting relativism and

31. See N. Koertge, 'Bartley's theory of rationality', in: *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 1974, 4, pp. 75-81.

32. See H. Feldman, 'More on the antagonism between anthropologists and missionaries', in: *Current Anthropology*, 1982, 23, p. 114.

33. I.C. Jarvie, 'Cultural relativism again', in: *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 1975, 5, pp. 343-353.

'anarchy of values' forms the background of the missionary reproach to anthropologists (see Merrifield in his talk with Benthall³⁴). This reproach does not recognize the fact that we are mainly concerned here with a *methodical* relativism. Whether those same anthropologists are also *cultural* or *ethical* relativists is not relevant – some are, some are not. Admittedly, cultural relativism is, in the end, self-defeating, because a relativist may logically be forced to defend, or at least tolerate, beliefs and practices which are abhorrent to him/her personally. Jarvie has aptly remarked:³⁵ "Relativism is a curiously unreal view. No one can actually live by it (even anthropologists – for if they do they become amoral)."

But the discussion on relativism has advanced beyond the question of whether to adopt a simple relativism or absolutism. Apart from noting that, if relativism is morally and logically untenable it does not follow that (e.g., Christian) absolutism is valid, one can conceive of a weaker form of absolutism, within a critical rationalist tradition, to provide a solution for the dilemma.

6. 'Weak absolutism' as a point of departure

The term 'weak absolutism' was coined by Jarvie.³⁶ It can be considered an option for anthropologists because it is in line with the basic assumptions of intercultural comparative social science: the unity of mankind and the universality of rationality (which is basically defined as "... the application of reason to tasks, effective action to achieve goals"³⁷).

'Weak absolutism' recognizes that some non-relative truths exist, i.e. *some* absolute, non-culturally relative truths. Adherents of this view believe neither that their culture or they themselves have a monopoly of truth nor that all cognitive efforts are on a par (strong absolutism says that there are no relative truths and that all truths are absolute; relativ-

34. Benthall, *ibid.*, p. 5.

35. Jarvie, *ibid.*, p. 348.

36. I.C. Jarvie, 'Rationality and relativism', in: *British Journal of Sociology*, 1983, 34, pp. 44-60.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

ism asserts that all truths are relative and that non-relative truths do not exist.³⁸

Quite a number of anthropologists still cling (consciously or not) to relativism, missionaries to strong absolutism. Many anthropologists (perhaps the majority) adhere to the weak absolutist view, which is much more fruitful when assessing problems of knowledge, social and cultural change, development, etc. in a transcultural perspective. There is a connection between weak absolutism and the rationality involved in learning about the world, when we subject our experience of cultures, customs and ideas to criticism and assessment; “. . . the general idea of promoting rationality becomes indistinguishable from the project of a critical, tolerant and undogmatic search for intellectual and social progress.”³⁹ This project is far from wholly successful yet; but it may be clear that the contribution of the missions is surely not sufficient, and as such, unsatisfactory. It presents a metaphysical program and a dogmatic outlook the adoption of which is not at all imperative. In this respect, the missions should undergo a metamorphosis in the direction of the project alluded to above.

7. Conclusion

On the basis of moral and epistemological arguments, there are fewer and fewer grounds to recognize missionary work in traditional cultures or societies as a legitimate, unquestionable activity. The negative attitude of anthropologists toward missionaries is not primarily a result of baseless presuppositions, but of an epistemological difference. Anthropologists stick to reason as long as possible in a fully accountable manner; missionaries (unwittingly or not) prefer absolutist commitment and want to present this as the solution for other peoples.

In the present conditions in the world, in a post-colonial era and marked by deep social and cultural problems of communication, missionary work has hardly anything to contribute of its own – in more and more countries the missions are seen also as inhibiting the autonomous search for more authentic forms and expressions of cultural and social identity.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

Many missionaries recognize this development as well. They become more independent and see their ‘mission’ more in personal terms. Then they can set a personal example for others, be of great social and human value in their educational, pastoral and medical work. They will keep their (Christian) motivation for doing so for themselves, seeing their belief as a personal inspiration which does not have to lead to conversion activities. Then non-Christians can also decide for themselves what elements of Christian belief they wish to adopt.

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