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Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture

Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity

by Joel Robbins

To this point, the anthropology of Christianity has largely failed to develop. When anthropologists study Christians, they do not see themselves as contributing to a broad comparative enterprise in the way those studying other world religions do. A close reading of the Comaroffs' *Of Revelation and Revolution* illustrates the ways in which anthropologists sideline Christianity and leads to a discussion of reasons the anthropology of Christianity has languished. While it is possible to locate the cause in part in the culture of anthropology, with its emphasis on difference, problems also exist at the theoretical level. Most anthropological theories emphasize cultural continuity as opposed to discontinuity and change. This emphasis becomes problematic where Christianity is concerned, because many kinds of Christianity stress radical change and expect it to occur. Confronted by people claiming that radical Christian change has occurred in their lives, anthropologists become suspicious and often explain away the Christian elements of their cultures. Christian assertions about change are hard for anthropologists to credit because anthropological and Christian models of change are based on different models of time and belief. Unless anthropologists reconsider their nearly exclusive commitment to continuity thinking and the models of time and belief that ground it, the anthropology of Christianity will continue to face handicaps to its development.

A number of anthropologists have recently begun working to establish the anthropology of Christianity as a recognized area of research (Cannell 2005; Keane n.d.; Robbins 2003a; 2004a, 27–34; Scott 2005). The point of their efforts is not simply to call for the production of ethnographic studies of Christian communities; these we have long had, and there is every indication that we will continue to have them in ever-growing numbers. Indeed, for some areas of the world, in particular Africa and Latin America, the ethnographic record is by now quite rich (for reviews see Fernandez 1978; Martin 1990; Meyer 2004; Robbins 2004b). Rather than simply seeking to foster greater ethnographic attention to Christianity as it is practiced in particular communities, then, the goal of those calling for the development of an anthropology of Christianity has been to foster a community of scholarship in which those who study Christian societies formulate common problems, read each other's works, and recognize themselves as contributors to a coherent body of research (cf. Cannell 2005, 340). Such a community has long existed in the anthropology

of Islam and Buddhism, just to take two traditions of research of which I have some knowledge (Robbins 2003a). Anthropologists studying communities that practice these religions regularly engage colleagues whose research focuses on parts of the world other than those in which they work. They have a robust sense that, despite the local differences that are everywhere apparent between cases, they are studying a common object or at least a set of comparable objects. They also have "anthropologist of Islam" or "anthropologist of Buddhism" as one of their most prominent scholarly identities. The creation of an explicit anthropology of Christianity would have the virtue of pushing those who study Christianity in the direction of forming a community like the ones that have already formed around these other world religions.¹

I take it as virtually self-evident that the anthropology of

1. I have discussed elsewhere the ways in which I think the anthropology of Islam can serve as something of a model for a nascent anthropology of Christianity (Robbins 2003a, 191–94). My point is not that all anthropologists of Islam agree on a single definition of the object they are studying or that they share a single approach to it but that, in spite of the absence of such a definition or dominant approach, they have managed to develop a productive comparative conversation that crosscuts regions and diverse Islamic traditions (see Launay 1992, 1–3 for a useful discussion of the development of the field in these terms; on related issues in the anthropology of Buddhism, see Gellner 1990).

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Christianity in this sense does not yet exist. People working on Christianity have only just begun to read across areal boundaries, and even this beginning has been made primarily by those studying Pentecostalism (e.g., Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001). Anthropologists who study Christianity also lack a strong sense of a common object or set of comparable objects and are very quick to point to the diversity of kinds of Christianity as a way of excusing themselves from comparative work. Finally, such scholars tend to have as their primary scholarly identities those grounded in their areal and theoretical interests. One rarely encounters, even today, people who identify themselves as anthropologists of Christianity.²

That an anthropology of Christianity has to this point failed to arise should not come as a shock. It goes hand in hand with the relative neglect of the study of Christianity within the discipline. But it is important to note that this neglect is not simply an oversight; it is actively produced. It is produced, obviously, by those interested in studying religion who choose to avoid Christian societies when they pick field sites.³ Even more problematic, it is produced by those who ignore or play down the Christian aspects of the places in which they do work by representing Christianity there as inconsistently and lightly held or as merely a thin veneer overlying deeply meaningful traditional beliefs, a veneer that people often construct for purposes of economic or political gain. This approach has until very recently been prevalent in Melanesia, the part of the world in which I carry out ethnographic research. As Barker (1992, 165) puts it,

most anthropologists [working in Melanesia] still regard Christianity as [a] foreign intrusion and continue to pursue the fading vestiges of uncontaminated traditional religions. . . . few anthropologists incorporate the Christian presence into studies of village societies. Christianity is the perennial outside force—threatening, corrupting, or merely dusting the surface of the authentic focus of anthropological concerns. In and of itself, it is of no interest. It can never become “cultural.”

2. A good indication of the comparatively inchoate state of the anthropology of Christianity can be found in the titles of several of the chapters in a recent “handbook” focused on the anthropology of religion (Glazier 1997). Part 3 of the handbook, entitled “Little and Great Traditions,” includes the following four chapters: “The Anthropology of Islam,” “Hinduism in Context: Approaching a Religious Tradition through External Sources,” “Buddhist Communities: Historical Precedents and Ethnographic Paradigms,” and “The Pilgrimage to Magdalena.” It is not hard to see which of these things is not like the others in its lack of ambition to represent the results produced by a well-formed subdiscipline.

3. Such avoidance has until recently been commonplace in Melanesia, the region I know best, and is amply attested in conversation with anthropologists who have worked there. It would be interesting to collect similar oral historical evidence from other regions. But even in the absence of positive evidence, the relative lack until quite recently of ethnographies focused on the religious lives of Christians in many areas in which Christianity is prevalent suggests that, in other places as well, anthropologists interested in religion have shied away from studying Christian groups.

Barker’s point, while made in the context of a discussion about the anthropology of Melanesia, holds for anthropology more generally. By denying Christianity cultural status in the places they study—denying that it is a meaningful system like others and one with its own coherence and contradictions—anthropologists actively charter their own lack of interest in it.

One could imagine that this characterization of the state of play within anthropology might have been accurate several decades ago, when people worried about capturing in pure form the symbolic structures of bounded cultural worlds, or that it might even now describe marginal work in the field, but still one would presume or hope that there exists today a body of important scholarship that has gone beyond these tropes of Christian irrelevance. To be sure, things are changing, and, as I noted above, there now exist a good number of monographs focused on the Christianity of particular peoples. Yet the situation is not as rosy as one might imagine, and the anthropology of Christianity is still at best a fledgling project.

Given this state of affairs, this article has two major aims. It seeks, first, to document the claim that the anthropological neglect of Christianity is actively produced. It pursues this goal by way of a close reading of the work of Jean and John Comaroff, particularly as represented in their influential two-volume (thus far) work *Of Revelation and Revolution*. I argue that despite the apparent centrality of Christianity to these books—books that are focused in large part on the encounter between Protestant missionaries and the Tswana of South Africa—in fact the Comaroffs manage to a great extent to write Christianity as a culture out of their discussion. By looking in detail at the ways they accomplish this, I hope to lay bare some of the sophisticated analytical work that can go into making Christianity appear to be absent or unimportant in many ethnographic settings where one might at least expect it to be something of a presence.

Having documented in one very influential case the efforts that have gone into sidelining Christianity as an anthropological object of study, the article aims to account for these efforts. As I will discuss briefly, the culture of anthropology, focused as it has been on difference, offers good reasons to ignore the religious tradition that is dominant in the places most anthropologists come from. But I also want to go beyond this kind of argument, which has already been well made by others, to suggest that some basic theoretical assumptions so central to anthropology as to underlie almost all of its traditions of analysis are antithetical to Christian assumptions and that this renders Christian cultures (particularly those in places that have not historically been Christian) particularly hard for anthropologists to recognize and describe. Key among these assumptions is that cultures endure and are very hard to change. Anthropology has generally been, I suggest, a science of continuity. This assumption of continuity is in turn related to assumptions about the nature of time and belief that support it. Christian ideas about change, time, and

belief are based on quite different assumptions, ones that are organized around the plausibility of radical discontinuities in personal lives and cultural histories. Only by recognizing this, I argue, will anthropologists be able to understand the way Christianity can become cultural in places where people have converted to it from other religious traditions.

On Producing the Ethnographic Absence of Christianity

It is impossible to prove an absence. Thus, as a counter to the adoption of too easy an optimism regarding the changing fortunes of Christianity as an object of anthropological study, I have found it instructive to forgo simply claiming that Christianity remains largely ignored in many cases in which it might be taken up and instead to examine in detail how Christianity comes to fare poorly in an influential body of work that many assume is focused upon it. The work I have in mind is the thus-far-published two volumes of the Comaroffs' (1991, 1997) *Of Revelation and Revolution* and some of the allied studies they have published covering similar material (collected in Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). *Of Revelation and Revolution* has been received as a classic in the anthropology of religion, and many imagine that it has to a large extent set the standard for those who would take up themes of Christianity, colonialism, and cultural transformation (Landau 2000, 501). It is widely seen, as a reviewer of the second volume has it, as "a masterly work on the evangelical reshaping and refiguration of the Tswana everyday world" (van Dijk 1998a, 529). Given such responses, it is understandable that those who have not read *Of Revelation and Revolution* or not read it carefully imagine that Christianity is at the very center of its concerns. In fact, however, it is not. Looking at the complex way in which the Comaroffs sideline Christianity provides an object lesson in the enduring influence, even on some of the most theoretically sophisticated and reflexively self-conscious anthropologists at work today, of the disciplinary tendency to assume that Christianity cannot be culturally important. It also makes evident some of the intellectual work that goes into rendering Christianity in such terms.

The focus of the Comaroffs' research is the encounter between British Nonconformist missionaries and the Southern Tswana people of South Africa between 1820 and 1920. The argument about this encounter that they pursue in more than 700 pages of text is that the missionaries largely failed to convey to the Tswana the content of the Christian message they preached but were nonetheless able to draw the Tswana into many of the aspects of the capitalist culture they represented in less verbally articulate ways and that by doing so they profoundly changed the world in which the Tswana lived. The Comaroffs call the process through which this mix of failure and success occurred "the long conversation." They describe this conversation as follows (1991, 199):

This conversation had two faces. Its overt content, what the

parties most often talked *about*, was dominated by the substantive message of the mission and was conveyed in sermons and services, in lessons and didactic dialogues. As we shall see, the gospel, delivered thus, made little sense along the South African frontier in the first half of the nineteenth century. More often than not, it was ignominiously ignored or rudely rejected. But, within and alongside these exchanges, there occurred another kind of exchange: an often quiet, occasionally strident struggle between the Europeans and the Africans to gain mastery over the *terms* of the encounter.

In the first volume, the Comaroffs demonstrate that the terms over which the two sides struggled in the long conversation had to do with the language of the encounter, how it would unfold in space, and what would count within it as knowledge and reasonable argument. In the second volume, they explore contests over proper ways of working, dressing, healing, building homes, and identifying oneself socially as other important moments in the unfolding dialogue. What the struggles of the long conversation appear never to have focused upon, however, is the cultural content of Christianity itself, since readers are assured in the above quotation and repeatedly throughout both books that the Tswana ignored it, did not understand it, resisted it, or rejected it out of hand (e.g., 1991, 201, 228, 236; 1997, 8, 69, 338). Christianity, as a system of meanings with a logic of its own, seems to have played little role in the long conversation.

How did Christianity come to occupy such an attenuated place in a process to which it was ostensibly central? Sometimes, the Comaroffs suggest, the lack of linguistic skills on the part of the missionaries rendered their preaching at best uninformative and at worst unintelligible (1997, 72, 430 n. 21). At other times Tswana were able to grasp the Christian message but upon doing so immediately recognized that it was "fundamentally antagonistic to their mode of existence" and therefore rejected it (1991, 237–38). More generally, we learn, "a markedly pragmatic," this-worldly indigenous understanding of religion rendered the Tswana relatively uninterested in, when not simply befuddled by, the spiritual, other-worldly telos of Protestant Christianity (1997, 86; see also 1997, 105–6, 137). Thus, on the side of Tswana reception, various factors working in concert conduced to put Christianity out of play.

Much more surprising than these rather common explanations for indigenous people's failure to take up Christianity as a culture is the Comaroffs' suggestion that the missionaries themselves hardly lived within or comprehended such a culture. The missionaries were not, the Comaroffs tell us early on, "unduly concerned with theological issues" (1991, 321, n. 26 from 65; see also 1997, 67). Indeed, they had little formal religious (or secular) education (1991, 84–85), a fact in which they took some pride (1997, 67), and in general they were not much given to "spiritual reflection" (1997, 67). As did the Tswana, it seems, "they saw themselves as men of practical religion" (1991, 320–21) whose evangelistic task had a "practical theology" at its "core" (1991, 320 n. 26; 1997, 135). Like

the eighteenth-century evangelists studied by Rack, whom the Comaroffs reference for this point, the Evangelists to the Tswana were “more influenced by the language of practical reason than their espousal of scripture and supernaturalism might suggest” (1997, 169). As the Comaroffs understand it, this “practical reason” was the logic of the capitalist culture dominant in the places from which the missionaries hailed. It was this capitalist cultural logic that was fundamental to the ways they thought about the world, not the Christian one that they had never studied and rarely reflected upon. And thus it is not surprising that it was this capitalist cultural logic into which they inducted the Tswana through the often implicit silent barter that went on in and around the explicitly Christian verbal exchanges of the long conversation.

The empirical story the Comaroffs tell, then, is one of how poorly educated and practical-minded missionaries, men who had equal faith in “the Gospels of Jesus and Adam Smith” (1997, 222), managed to convey only the latter gospel to a group of Africans who, practical-minded themselves, missed or rejected the former. It is a story in which Christianity as a cultural phenomenon plays very little role. In this respect, it is quite a typical piece of anthropology.

Of course, one has to consider the possibility that the Comaroffs tell the story of the Tswana-missionary encounter in the way they do because it represents what really happened. This may be true as far as it goes for that subset of Tswana whom they choose to examine, but the Comaroffs themselves would probably counsel suspicion in the face of a simple appeal to empirical adequacy to explain the shape a text takes, and we should perhaps follow their lead in this. Assuming that their account gives Christianity the weight it deserves in Tswana history leaves out all of the work the Comaroffs have had to do to make Christianity largely disappear from the story they tell. They have carried out this work on two levels, one having to do with their selection of which Tswana to focus on and the other closely tied to the theoretical approach they develop throughout their analysis.

Let me start with the issue of focus. In several places in the first volume of *Of Revelation and Revolution*, the Comaroffs note that some Tswana engaged deeply with the Christian message. Often, we are told, these people were marginals and women (1991, 238–40, 310). We also learn in the second volume that very early on some Tswana converts became assistant evangelists to their fellows (1997, 80–86). Then there is the report that some of these living at a distance from the mission itself were developing “an orthodox Christianity” that was “fairly conventional in its content” (p. 93) and another report of some people who rejected the missionaries but not their “Word” or “style of worship” (pp. 95, 105). Finally, it is clear that once distinct classes began to develop among the Tswana, the mission church found many “orthodox members” among the elites (pp. 107, 154).

Despite these hints that some Tswana were at least exploring the possibility of construing their lives in Christian terms,

these people and their explorations never occupy the center of the Comaroffs’ attention, and their engagement with the logic of Christianity is never described in detail. Sometimes the Comaroffs explain away the Christian character of their beliefs by arguing, as anthropologists regularly do, that no matter how interested they were in orthodox doctrine, they could not help but indigenize it and turn it into something else (1997, 81, 115). Alternatively, those who too rigorously reproduced the orthodoxy are accused of coming close to simple mimicry (p. 82). Rather than focus on the devices that the Comaroffs use to airbrush Christianity out of the Tswana picture, however, it is more important that we recognize the general labor of careful focusing and boundary drawing that has gone into producing the empirical picture of the non-Christian or only nominally Christian Tswana that dominates their account.

Having considered the work the Comaroffs do to produce the non-Christian Tswana in empirical terms, it remains to make a few remarks on the theory through which they discuss their findings. At the heart of this theory is the claim that “colonized people like the Southern Tswana frequently reject the message of the colonizers, and yet are powerfully affected by its media” (1991, 311). This argument is based on a form/content distinction that plays a prominent role throughout both volumes, with “media” in this case representing form and “the message” representing content. It can, I find, be difficult to determine exactly how the Comaroffs distinguish form from content across instances of their use. The distinction is in some cases straightforward enough, as when the Comaroffs exemplify it by pointing to the difference between “knowledge” and “models of knowing” (p. 29). But then, in another context, they treat both “models of” and “models for” as content in a way that confounds my sense of models as forms that people use to abstract from or shape contents (1992, 237). And even more than content, form seems in the Comaroffs’ usage to be an extremely capacious concept, one that takes in, for example, “the commodity form, linguistic forms, epistemological forms,” and such allied phenomena as conceptions of the person, of labor, of value, and of rational argument (1991, 30; 1992, 258). In fact, the only thing that clearly is not form is the logic of Christianity, for this rather constitutes the content whose rejection appears to motivate the distinction in the first place (cf. Peel 1995, 588–89).

Overall, the Comaroffs’ form/content distinction strikes me as untenable. Where culture is concerned, forms are, as Hayden White (1987) would tell us, part of the content. What the Comaroffs actually argue throughout this book is that the Tswana took on (and modified, etc.) much of the culture of capitalism while rejecting the culture of Christianity and that the former was in part communicated to them nonverbally or at least inexplicitly (see 1997, 407, for an explicit statement of the focus on capitalism). The form/content distinction, at least as the Comaroffs deploy it, does not add much beyond confusion to this argument. More troubling, however, is that

it implies that contents are often rejected in the colonial process while forms are often taken up and that Christianity must always be content. It is clear that in some places people have taken up the content of Christianity as a coherent if not always noncontradictory worldview. They may to some extent accomplish this by reading and listening to explicit verbal messages, and they may also find themselves drawn into it through the largely nonverbal or inexplicit channels that brought the Tswana into capitalism. But by defining Christianity as content and thus suggesting that this process is unlikely to happen in its case, the Comaroffs decidedly direct attention away from it. In Barker's terms, they masterfully erect a theoretical edifice in terms of which Christianity can never be cultural. From the point of view of a nascent anthropology of Christianity, then, the Comaroffs' work is not so much an exciting beginning as a mature and unprecedentedly sophisticated late flowering of the discipline's long-standing tendency to treat Christianity as unimportant.

This discussion of the Comaroffs' work should not be read as arguing that their monumental historical anthropology of the Tswana is not an important anthropological accomplishment. The claim is only that it is not a major innovation in the anthropological study of Christianity; its prominence does not mark a new dawn for a topic that the discipline has long relegated to the shadows. To the extent that the Comaroffs intend their work to be read as an account of the formation of a culture engaged with capitalism in a particular way and not as a work primarily about Christianity at all, my discussion should perhaps not even count as a critique of it. But, given the importance the book has had in the anthropology of religion and the tendency for anthropologists to consider it a work focused on Christianity, the task of showing the way in which it has further refined the techniques by which anthropology has generally rendered Christianity unimportant is a necessary one.

In concluding the discussion of the Comaroffs' work, it is worth noting that, considering its strengths as an account of historical change, a final ironic complication of my own discussion of it arises if one looks forward to an argument I will make in the rest of the paper. I will claim that anthropology has in large part disregarded Christianity because it has neither been interested in nor theorized discontinuity. One way to read *Of Revelation and Revolution* as a truly innovative project is to see it as charting for the political-economic realm the way in which important discontinuities were introduced into Tswana culture. Read in this way, the Comaroffs' work does go against a long-standing anthropological bias against describing or theorizing radical culture change (and it has been criticized on these grounds [see Englund and Leach 2000]). The irony is, however, that they deny in the realm of religion precisely the kinds of changes they so carefully track in the rest of Tswana culture. Given the anthropological tendency to see religion as at the core of "authentic" traditional culture (cf. Brown 1981, 18–22), the Comaroffs' split perspective in this

instance is perhaps overdetermined. In any case, their willingness to engage change elsewhere in Tswana life only serves to make more striking their treatment of the culture of Christianity as unimportant in the process of transformation.

Continuity and the Problem of Christianity

Having documented an anthropological tendency to discount the importance of Christianity, the next step is to account for it. The reasons for it are surely numerous, and many are rooted in the culture of anthropology itself. Some are easy to divine, among them the aversion one would imagine that those attracted to exploring cultural difference would have to studying a religion that is dominant at home (it seems that even capitalism, with its notorious mystifications, is more exotic). Others, such as those uncovered in Harding's (1991) path-breaking article "Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other," are less obvious. One example would be the fact that the empathetic understanding of kinds of Christianity forged in opposition to modernist scientific outlooks presents an affront to disciplinary self-understanding such that for anthropologists to say that those Christians make sense in their own terms is to question whether anthropologists make sense in theirs. Another would be the tense mix of disdain and dependence that often marks the relationships anthropologists have had with missionaries in the field. I review some of these cultural impediments to the development of the anthropology of Christianity elsewhere in more detail in the hope that, by taking a reflexive stance with regard to our own resistance to the study of Christianity, we can work to overcome it (Robbins 2003a, 192–93).

As important as these cultural obstacles have been in stunting the development of an anthropology of Christianity, however, I focus here on a different set of problems that feed into what is surely an overdetermined history of neglect. These problems are ones that stem from what, for lack of a better phrase, I will call the deep structure of anthropological theorizing. Of course, problems of anthropological theory are from one perspective also problems of culture, but for present purposes I want to isolate deep-seated theoretical problems from the more obviously cultural problems I alluded to above. I do this because I think the theoretical problems will prove in the long run to be the hardest to solve.

The core problem on the theoretical level is that cultural anthropology has largely been a science of continuity (Robbins 2003b). I mean by this that cultural anthropologists have for the most part either argued or implied that the things they study—symbols, meanings, logics, structures, power dynamics, etc.—have an enduring quality and are not readily subject to change. This emphasis is written into theoretical tenets so fundamental as to underlie anthropological work on

culture from almost all theoretical perspectives.⁴ It is even at least implicitly written into most definitions of culture. In an article that identified the bias toward continuity thinking in the early 1980s, Smith (1982, 131) quotes the influential definition of culture that appears in the final chapter of Kroeber and Kluckhohn's (1963, 357) famous study of the culture concept:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups . . . ; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action.

On this definition, culture comes from yesterday, is reproduced today, and shapes tomorrow. It is an inherited tradition that structures action in such a way as to insure that it will be continually passed on. There is no explicit room in this definition for change and certainly not for radical change. It is, as Smith says in her commentary, "implicit in our thinking that sociocultures are derived from an individual and collective concern with continuity."

The emphasis on continuity that is grounded in the notion of culture as inherited tradition is also supported by a further disciplinary truism that Kroeber and Kluckhohn do not incorporate into their definition but upon which their ideas are clearly based. This truism is that people cannot but perceive the new in terms of their received cultural categories. Where perception is not simple reproduction of the cultural categories, it is catachresis. No one ever really perceives anything new as such (LiPuma 2000, 212).

Clearly I am reading these anthropological ideas in a mechanical way and taking no note of the various modifications scholars have made in putting them to use. Indeed, one might imagine that several decades given over to the study first of practice and history and then of modernity and globalization would have rendered this kind of continuity thinking obsolete, putting definitions of culture focused on change at the forefront of anthropological concern. Yet even in the grip of these recent trends there remains, I would claim, a tendency to stress cultural continuity even in the course of arguments that take change as their ostensible subject. Conceptions of habitus and of structures of the *longue durée*, as well as those of localization, indigenization, and syncretism, all serve to foster this tendency. Given its strength, the most common and satisfying anthropological arguments are those that find some enduring cultural structure that persists underneath all the

4. The focus on continuity as an aspect of culture and hence of social life serves as something of a diacritic setting anthropology off from such otherwise closely allied disciplines as sociology and history (see Patterson 2004 on discontinuity emphases in the latter two disciplines). As such, its own enduring character may owe a good deal to the politics of disciplinary self-definition.

surface changes and, in the last analysis, serves to guide them and determine the sense they make—a sense that, in spite of whatever new elements might be part of it, should still be one displaying some continuities with those of the past. I see no reason, then, to abandon my claim that, in the relatively short history of anthropology, continuity thinking has been a disciplinary structure of the *longue durée* of precisely the type I want to suggest is not a universal cultural necessity.⁵

My point in raising these issues is not to argue that continuity thinking or its constituent parts are completely wrong. In many (indeed, perhaps most) cases, cultural structures, patterns, or models are extremely enduring, and even in cases of radical cultural change many of them may persist alongside the new ones that people take on (Robbins 2004a). But we need to be aware of the blind spots that continuity thinking produces and the questions it puts out of bounds. I think, for example, that it is responsible for the neglect of the topic of learning in mainstream cultural anthropology. A good anthropology of how people learn would let us move beyond the truism that groups of people always perceive the new through the old to ask how long this dynamic lasts and how through the learning process groups of people sometimes completely transcend old ideas and therefore discard them. I also think that our continuity bias is the reason we have so robust an anthropology of resistance alongside so slim an anthropology of revolution (Graeber 2005). And finally—and this is what is crucial here—I think that continuity thinking makes the notion of non-Western Christian cultures hard for anthropologists to fathom. In particular, it makes certain claims that previously non-Christian converts make about their lives hard for anthropologists to credit. Many of the most important of these claims have to do with discontinuities in time and in belief. In pursuing their doubts about what converts say on these matters, anthropologists often come to suspect that those who make these claims are not Christian at all or at least that they fail to live up to their own self-professed Christian ideals concerning discontinuity and change. It is the roots of such suspicion that I want to explore in what follows.

Anthropological and Christian Models of Time

Let me begin with some broad statements about Christianity and the ways in which it handles time:⁶

Christianity represents time as a dimension in which radical change is possible. It provides for the possibility, indeed the salvational necessity, of the creation of ruptures between the

5. Patterson (2004, 73) makes a precisely inverse statement about sociology's ironic "dogmatic anti-continuative intellectual continuity."

6. The discussion in this section and the following one draws on an ideal-typical notion of Christianity that in its totality most closely resembles certain forms of Protestantism. I address my reasons for working with such an ideal-typical model and the need for comparative work to bring out variation between various kinds of Christianity in the conclusion.

past, the present, and the future. The nature of such change is modeled first of all in Christianity's relation to its own past, for it represents itself as having made a decisive break with the Judaism from which it sprang and as having inaugurated a wholly new epoch of divine-human interaction. As Hooker (1986) has argued, the very first followers of Jesus may well have stressed the continuities between their practices and those of the Jewish faith to which they still saw themselves committed. But when Christianity became dominated by gentiles, the drive for differentiation became strong. It found an early expression in Paul's rejection of the Jewish law and later developed into a doctrine of radical discontinuity with what came before (see also Badiou 2003, 35). From the point of view of the people anthropologists study today, what is crucial is the way the memory of this rupture is preserved in Christian tradition. Christianity is perhaps unique among religions in keeping the discontinuity that marked its birth at the forefront of its followers' minds. It does, after all, bind its own testament with the "old" one that it represents itself as having fulfilled and superseded and thereby makes the rupture in time created by its arrival permanently constitutive of the identity of those who practice it.

Hooker's point is not that there were or are no continuities between Christianity and Judaism but that Christians have for much of their history chosen to emphasize the discontinuities.⁷ I would argue that this emphasis in its turn has led to the elaboration of notions of time that allow for ruptures to appear within its flow. Such elaboration has had a profound impact on the way Christians understand their lives in two further domains in particular: conversion and eschatology. I will discuss these in turn.

Christian converts tend to represent the process of becoming Christian as one of radical change. One does not evolve into a convert. One does not convert by slow, almost imperceptible steps such that one might become Christian without even knowing it. To be sure, not everyone reports having an experience akin to Paul's on the road to Damascus, and even conversionist-minded evangelicals allow for the possibility that the path to conversion may be a long one (Stackhouse 2002, 103–20). But conversion itself, however long it takes to get there, is always an event, a rupture in the time

7. Since my focus at this point is on the development of a Christian *rhetoric* of discontinuity with what has come before, a rhetoric often picked up by converts, I am not concerned with whether early Christianity should be understood in analytic terms as actually marking a radical break with what came before. But because later I will urge anthropologists to consider the possibility that the claims to discontinuity made by converts may not only serve rhetorical functions but also reflect situations of actual change, it is worth pointing out that there are church historians who argue that from very early on Christianity was in fact markedly different from the Judaism from which it arose. On these points, I have found very stimulating the work of Hurtado (1998, 2003), who argues that the "binatarian" character of early Christian devotion (its quality of addressing not only God but also Jesus) "exhibited a sudden and significant difference in character from Jewish devotion" (Hurtado 1998, 99).

line of a person's life that cleaves it into a before and after between which there is a moment of disconnection. Most kinds of conversionist Christianity mark this moment and ritualize it, as with rites of baptism that in the "clear-cut, boundary-marking" way they define membership are, according to Ruel (1997, 41–42), unique amongst the world religions. In such rituals, the status of conversion as an interruption in the time line of a person's life is celebrated as such, rather than treated as a problem that needs to be repaired (see Engelke 2004; Meyer 1998; and van Dijk 1998b on discontinuity and conversion in several African cases, Dombrowski 2001 for Native North American cases, Zehner 2005 on Thailand, and Burdick 1993 and Gill 1990 on Latin America).⁸

When one is dealing, as anthropologists often are, with whole groups of people who have converted from a non-Christian religion to Christianity, the structure of the individual conversion narrative often comes to shape people's accounts of their collective history. In such cases, collective history too is told, to borrow Gellner's (1964) formulation, in episodic, before-and-after terms. Thus the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, a group of 390 people living in the remote West Sepik Province with whom I carried out fieldwork in the early 1990s, have an established way of narrating their past that takes the following form: "We lived as our ancestors did until 1977, when the Holy Spirit of God 'came down' during the 'revival.' Since then, we have been Christians. We no longer follow the ways of the ancestors, and everything has changed." "Before was before," Urapmin say, "and now is now." This model of history has become quite dominant in Urapmin thinking, and people not only narrate it over and over but also use it to reason with. I remember asking a very bright 30-year-old, one of the rising stars on the Urapmin political horizon, when the Urapmin gave up the custom of having sons-in-law shake hands with their mothers-in-law by holding out a stick to them so that the two would not have to touch. He was not sure when, he said; it had happened when he was young. Then he thought for a moment and said, "It must have been during the revival in 1977—that's when it must have been, since that's when everything changed." This was a small turn in a passing conversation, but it is telling for that very reason of how taken-for-granted the Christian model of radical historical change has become for the Urapmin. Such a model—what with comparative tongue only slightly in cheek we might call the BC/AD model (cf. Zerubavel 2003)—occupies a similar place in the thinking of many of the Christians anthropologists study.

Turning from conversion to eschatology, we can note that the radical change constituted by conversion foreshadows for

8. Making a related point about the value Christians attach to ruptures in personal experience, Luhrmann (2004), in her work among North American Evangelicals, has found an enduring postconversion emphasis on discontinuity as well. For the Christians she writes about, experienced discontinuities in consciousness serve as "signs of God's presence in their lives" (p. 524).

many Christians an equally abrupt one that is to come with the arrival of the millennium. Much of the imagery of a rupture in life's normal time line that is present in many models of conversion is also given elaborate and explicit treatment in discourses on the coming of the millennium. The watchful waiting for a messiah who will come like a thief in the night that many Christians enjoin on one another is premised on the idea that at any moment a future could arrive totally independent of the causal thrust of the present.

I can illustrate the orientation to time that this millennial thinking produces by again briefly examining the Urapmin case. The Urapmin await a second coming that will change their lives completely. In the wake of it, the saved among them will find heaven, the damned will be consigned to hell, and the earth will be destroyed. Those who come to live in heaven will find that the most crucial distinctions that currently shape their lives—in particular that between “white” people who live in the “developed” world and “black” people like themselves who do not—will have disappeared (Robbins 1998). No one, the Urapmin regularly say (quoting the Bible), knows the day or the hour when this radical change will occur. Even Jesus does not know. So they wait in a constant state of expectation. This is a state that sometimes finds expression in periods of millennial frenzy but is very much present in quieter periods as well. It renders the Urapmin always ready for a radical change the timing of which they do not expect to be able to predict.

Scholars have not, I think, fully recognized or attended to similarities between the rupturing of temporal continuity in conversion and in millennial imaginings or tied these to the similar rupture that, in Christian understandings, lies at the origin of Christian history. In all three cases, something does not just happen in time but rather happens to it. One temporal progression is halted or shattered and another is joined. It is this kind of thinking about the possibility of temporal rupture that allows people to make claims for the absolute newness of the lives they lead after conversion and of the ones they hope they will lead in the millennial future. And it is these claims to absolute novelty that anthropologists often find hard to credit.

In good measure, the difficulty anthropologists have in finding a way to make sense of these claims stems from the model of time that underlies their continuity thinking. This model is based, as Fabian (1983) puts it, on a desacralized, naturalized view of time. It is, to borrow Gellner's (1964, 5) terms again, not an episodic view of time that expects major disruptions and discrete epochs but an “evolutionist” one that sees change “as a kind of perpetual process” rather than an event. This process occurs within (to borrow one more famous phrasing) what Benjamin (1969, 261) calls “homogeneous, empty time,” in which all moments are alike and effect follows cause in a predictable manner. This is the kind of time *in* which things happen but not *to* which things happen. It is steady and regular and supports a model of the world in which continuity is the default assumption.

In Benjamin's original formulation, the notion of homogeneous, empty time is opposed to a messianic model of time in which certain kinds of events “make the continuum of history explode” (1969, 261). In this model the linear, predictable unfolding of homogeneous, empty time is susceptible to discontinuities caused by events that come, as it were, from outside of it. It is, in other words, precisely the model of time that I have been arguing underlies Christian talk about Christian history, conversion, and the millennium.

Benjamin's concern in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” where he introduces these two models of time, is with countering arguments about the course of historical progress (social democratic but also Soviet Marxist ca. 1940) founded on the model of homogeneous, empty time and the “false concepts of continuity” it supports (Tiedemann 1983–84, 76). For anthropologists too, the notion of homogeneous, empty time and the claims it makes possible about the primacy of continuity and about change as slow, conservative development leads to difficulties, particularly, in relation to the present argument, by rendering them unable to comprehend in a sympathetic way Christian discourses about history, conversion, the coming of the millennium, and radical change more generally. As Fabian (1983, 10) notes, the most debilitating aspect of the naturalized time of the anthropologists is that it claims to be “a knowledge of Time which is . . . superior” to the knowledge of those we study. It thus makes the claims that Christians make about the force of messianic, episodic time in their personal and collective lives and histories appear patently false. The conviction of superiority in this case leads to an anthropological hermeneutics of suspicion by means of which people's claims to discontinuity are shown to be incorrect and to mask more fundamental continuities.

In relation to conversion, this suspicion most often expresses itself in arguments that converts' fundamental ways of looking at the world have not really changed. One common argument that anthropologists deploy in support of such skepticism is that people actually convert for everyday, pragmatic reasons—in search of things like money and power. These arguments assert that, while converts may dress up their speech and behavior in the clothes of Christian change, underneath them they are the same people pursuing goals fully recognizable from within their traditional cultures (Robbins 2004a).

Another support for claims that converts have not really changed is the classification of their Christian speech as cliché. Very often anthropologists in informal conversation say that although the people they worked with claimed to be converts, their Christianity amounted to little more than the mind-numbing (from the anthropologist's point of view) repetition of a few well-worn formulae about Jesus, God, sin, etc. I do not want to dwell on the problems with this claim—the extent to which it neglects the clichéd aspects of all cultural discourse, for example, or the fact that it rarely leads to recognition of the need for a model of the positive role of repetition in Christian discourse (see Harding 2000). I simply want to point out

that the implication of the classification of Christian speech as cliché is the construal of it as the least meaningful kind of speech its speakers produce. What converts say outside of Christian contexts—most generally what they say that sounds pre-Christian—must, then, represent their true, deeply held ways of thinking: ways of thinking that are, unsurprisingly, continuous with those of the past.

Perhaps the most profound expression of anthropological skepticism as regards converts' claims to have been radically changed comes in the call to discard the category of conversion all together. Here again we can see the Comaroffs as representatives of the mature development of anthropological tendencies to disregard Christianity, for they have asserted that conversion is not "a significant analytic category in its own right" (1991, 250). They essentially level four arguments against it. First, it is a theological construct, borrowed in most cases from Christian ideology (p. 249). Second, it conflates individual with cultural change (pp. 250–51). Third, it reifies the notion of religious "belief," abstracting it from a wider cultural surround that may in some ways contest or complicate it (p. 251). And fourth, it is bound up with the Western notion of the autonomous economic individual who chooses where to spend his or her resources, in this case spiritual (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, 258). In this last respect, the notion of conversion is Western ideology plain and simple, and to "dress [it] up" as an analytic category or explanatory principle is to ignore that in the history of "European colonialism . . . it has always been part of its apparatus of cultural coercion" (1991, 251).

I am not inclined to disagree with any of the Comaroffs' four charges against the notion of conversion—it is, after all, a cultural notion with a particular history. But even if all these charges are true, that does not mean that people might not pick up the Christian notion of conversion and come to see their lives in its terms. Certainly the Urapmin do employ it as a theological category and do use it to knit together individual and collective history, as we have seen. Furthermore, in the wake of conversion they have reified a realm of Christian religion taken to be apart from the rest of their culture, and they have begun in complex and contested ways to develop a sense of individual autonomy (see Robbins 2004a). Their experience of conversion thus presents the very qualities that the Comaroffs suggest should be absent. In the Urapmin case, at least, conversion has become a category that serves to guide change and the perception of it. Where the notion of conversion has taken root, as it has in Urapmin, we will need some analytic notion that highlights people's investment in discontinuity if we are to make comparative observations and develop theoretical accounts of how such ideas operate when people adopt them. Whether or not we keep the term "conversion" to label that analytic notion, we must be careful not to throw the phenomenal baby out with the terminological bath water.

Turning from anthropological skepticism about conversion to that concerning millenarianism, we can note that the prob-

lem millenarianism presents for continuity thinking is different from the one presented by conversion. Faced with conversion, what anthropologists tend to doubt is that the changes that have occurred are as radical as converts claim. In the millenarian case, what is suspect is people's assertion that they are truly convinced that tomorrow might not bear a temporal (and causal) relationship to today (Robbins 2001a). The upshot of anthropologists' doubts on this score is that for them only people who participate full time in radical millenarian movements count as committed millenarians. Everyone else is, when it comes to their millenarian beliefs, just toying with the idea of radical change. We can move beyond this narrow view by recognizing a kind of everyday millenarianism that allows people like the Urapmin to await the millennium with equal fervor during times in which they seem to be part of millennial movements and during times in which they might be described as simply living their daily lives (Robbins 2001a; see also De Boeck 2005 for an African case). I have made this argument more fully elsewhere (Robbins 2001a) and do not want to rehearse it here. Rather, I want to point out that the general incredibility of millenarian statements when they come from the mouths of any but millennial-movement diehards allows anthropologists yet another way to ignore Christians' claims to be living in discontinuous time and thus to assert the insubstantial nature of their Christian commitments and, as Fabian has it, the superiority of the anthropologists' own view of time and change.

We might summarize the argument I have been making about time by saying that anthropologists assume that people's beliefs are difficult to change and therefore endure through time. Time, for its part, moves with a regular, steady rhythm and thus provides a medium in which the continuity of belief unfolds. Christians, by contrast, tend to imagine their religion as historically constituted by Jesus's rupturing of earthly time by his birth and by the deep rent this eventually made in the fabric of Jewish belief. Moreover, they expect such change to occur in their own experience at conversion and again at the second coming. Since these Christian ideas are in such open contradiction to anthropological assumptions about time and change, it is hardly surprising that anthropologists have been quick to argue that Christians' claims as regards these matters are false, even about their own lives, and therefore that people who make the truth of such claims a criterion of their Christianity are not really Christian at all or are not primarily or coherently so.

In the summary I have just presented, I indicated that in continuity thinking it is beliefs that are seen to endure. I say this because beliefs very often seem to be what anthropologists refer to when they make assertions about the non-Christian character of particular peoples. Even if such people engage in what appear to be Christian ritual practices, they do not really believe in Christianity, the argument goes, or their Christian beliefs are only lightly held or their real, coherently organized beliefs are traditional. In the next section I look at both anthropological and Christian notions of belief and suggest that

in the effort to overcome our sole reliance on continuity thinking we need to reconsider them just as we have our notions of time.

Christians and Anthropologists on Belief

Asad's (1993) influential critique of Geertz's (1966) definition of religion turns on the assertion that "Geertz's treatment of religious belief, which lies at the core of his conception of religion, is a modern, privatized Christian one because and to the extent that it emphasizes the priority of belief as a state of mind rather than as a constituting activity in the world" (Asad 1993, 47). I do not want to linger over whether Asad is fair to Geertz in this statement. What I do want to put on the table is Asad's assertion that anthropological ideas about the centrality of belief to religion are based on post-Reformation Christian conceptions. For this reason, Asad's argument goes, these ideas bring with them a host of expectations about the sincerity of religious believers and about the coherence of their inner thought worlds that have time and again served anthropologists poorly in their approach to other cultures. Taking just the literature on Papua New Guinea (an example that Asad does not consider), anthropologists working with these assumptions have often found people there to be skeptical of the religious ideas prevalent in their societies (or at least of the completeness of those ideas) and have also found the relations that hold between those ideas to be marked by "disorder." Working from definitions of religion with belief at their center, some anthropologists in the past took these observations to mean that many Papua New Guineans ought to be defined as primarily pragmatic, given to ceremony over ritual, and as in general not very religious (Brunton 1980; Lawrence and Meggitt 1965). These claims were, in hindsight, founded on the inappropriate categories anthropologists brought with them, and no one makes much of them any more. But even if belief-centered definitions of religion can lead us to get Papua New Guineans and many others wrong, the more pressing question for the current argument is whether, given their Christian origins, they help us to get Christians right. At least when it comes to recent converts outside the historical sphere of Christian dominance, my answer would be no. Instead, such definitions, which are still widely deployed, become another tool in the kit of those who would question the Christian status of convert cultures.

To see why theories of religion built around the idea of belief serve the anthropological study of Christianity so poorly, it is useful to review some of the semantic history of the verb "to believe." Although a complex field of argument has developed over the semantic development of the English verb "to believe" and its Greek and Hebrew cognates, one thing upon which there is consensus is the need to distinguish between two broad senses that can be captured in the English distinction between "to believe in" and "to believe that." To believe in a thing, person, or idea—"I believe in God," for example—means to trust it and implies a commitment to act

in a certain way toward it. To utter the verb "to believe" in this "believe in" form also conveys a sense of certainty and conviction about what one is saying and about the rightness of the actions one's speech is explaining or justifying. The phrase "believe that," by contrast, is usually applied to propositional statements—"I believe that God exists"—and implies a sense of uncertainty about the truth of the proposition, an uncertainty that would not be carried by the use of the verb "to know." The tension between these two senses of the verb "to believe" is why it is funny when the Catholic philosopher Gianni Vattimo, asked if he believes in God, answers, "I believe so" (Vattimo 1999 [precise phrasing is from the back cover; see also p. 70]). The question is asked in "believe in" terms but answered in "believe that" ones (Vattimo 2002, 1–3).

The anthropologist Ruel (1997, 40) claims that Christian uses of the verb "to believe" have always carried both senses at once (see also Pouillon 1982, 6). But Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1998), who anticipates some of the critical aspects of Asad's discussion of the notion of religion even as his constructive efforts lead in a very different direction (see Asad 2001), argues persuasively that early Christians used the verb "to believe" primarily in the "believe in" sense, with all its attendant certainty, and that in saying "I believe in God" they meant not only that they trusted in God but also that they pledged themselves to him. Believing was for them, as Asad would have it more generally, an act, not "a state of mind" (Smith 1998, 56–57). Smith goes on to trace the historical development of the semantics of the verb "to believe" in ways that mostly need not detain us, but two aspects of his account require notice here. One is that over time the "believe that" usage became more prevalent. As the propositional form became the unmarked one, "to believe" also lost its connotations of certainty. The other is that in the twentieth century there was a move from using the verb "to believe" almost exclusively in the first person to using it also in the third person. When this shift is combined with the drift toward using it primarily in the propositional sense, it produces statements of the "They believe that *x*" type. These are descriptive statements about ideas that are presumably in other people's heads, and they are ones that make no claim to the accuracy of those ideas. They are also precisely the kinds of statements on which much anthropological discussion of culture is based (Smith 1998, 53–54).

If we borrow Smith's argument about the inappropriateness of defining religion in terms of propositional belief and apply it to the tendency to define culture in these terms, we can suggest that such definitions are problematic because, as is the case in the religious domain, so too as regards culture more generally it is probably only moderns, and perhaps only elite moderns, who have understood themselves primarily to be engaged in believing that certain propositions are true about the world. More often, as with the early Christians in Smith's account, people have been involved in believing *in* certain gods, values, etc., and thereby committing themselves to them and ordering their lives or parts of their lives around

them. There is no question of proving this conclusively here, of course. But it is worth noting that, among those anthropologists and other comparativists who have carefully considered “believing” in the “believe that” sense, none see it as a cross-culturally valid concept, while some do see the “believe in” concept or something like it translating quite well (e.g., Keller 2005; Pouillon 1982; Ruel 1997).⁹ This is certainly true in Urapmin, where the Tok Pisin term *bilip* (from the English “believe”) is widely used. Whenever I asked people what they meant by this term, they spoke of trusting God to do what he promised. As one person put it to me, “It’s like I believe in you. When you say you will give me a shirt, I trust that you will do that.” Tellingly, when they spoke of being convinced, during the period of conversion, of the fact that God existed, they talked in terms not of coming to “believe” that he existed but of “knowing” or “seeing” that he existed. For them, Christian belief is about trusting God and acting accordingly; it is not about mentally assenting to a set of propositions about him.

A further attack on the portability of the “believe that” model of culture comes from those (e.g., Schieffelin n.d.; Keane 2002; Robbins 2001*b*) who have noted that the fact that this model renders the expression of true belief a central aspect of religious practice presupposes notions of sincerity that are most often found in cultures influenced by modern, post-Reformation Christianity and are not universally present in others. People in many places find it difficult to imagine carrying out the act of sincerely expressing their assent to specific propositions to others through speech because their traditional language ideologies do not allow for this kind of practice. Many recently converted Protestants struggle with the Christian demand that they do so and find this a hard part of their new religion to understand. They are inclined, in keeping with the “believe in” framework, to imagine that people’s truth commitments will be most reliably expressed in the nonverbal ways they act in the world.

I hope to have at least made plausible the claim, in many ways just an extension of Asad’s argument, that anthropologists have looked for belief in the wrong places by virtue of their tendency to assume that “belief that” statements are the most important part of culture. But what does all of this have to do with how anthropologists understand Christian convert cultures? The answer has to do with the way anthropologists tend to handle what we might call situations of mixed belief. If we assume that culture consists of a set of propositional beliefs, it then becomes natural in situations of cultural change such as conversion to ask which propositions are new and which are old. When anthropologists ask this of the cultures of recent converts, they invariably find that, in spite of

people’s claims to be Christian, many of their propositional beliefs are demonstrably old. Moreover, people can be shown to be interpreting at least some propositions that look new in old ways. Given their disciplinary drive to stress continuity and the patent falseness within this propositional framework of Christian claims to complete transformation, anthropologists tend to regard these as situations in which people are not best studied as Christian (Green 2003, 5).

Put otherwise, “belief that” models of religions and cultures lend themselves to continuity thinking. They do this by encouraging those who use them to treat religions and cultures as made up of a wide assortment of different propositions to which people assent. Radical change would, such models have it, require the elimination of most older propositions. Since such wholesale elimination of older propositions rarely or perhaps never occurs, it is not difficult from the point of view of these models to find continuity lurking in almost all cases of apparent change.

What I have just tried to do is reframe quite standard ways of handling syncretism in terms of the kind of propositional belief logic that often underlies them. Arguments about the real identity of syncretic cultures produced under this logic and the tropes of Christian surfaces and traditional depths that support them are too familiar to require further remark here. What my argument suggests is that this line of thinking might be productively rethought from the point of view of the other belief logic I have introduced—the one that imagines that “belief in” notions are more fundamental than “belief that” ones in trying to identify what people are up to culturally. If we were to take this approach, we would define people as Christian to the extent that one of the things they were most fundamentally trying to do was achieve salvation in Christian terms. Not everything they do has to have Christian salvation as its proximate goal. It is enough that some of their actions do and that they can and do locate other of their actions in relation to this goal. Such a shift in perspective would allow us to discover and analyze discontinuity even in cases where older elements still retain places in the cultures under consideration.

A final Urapmin example may be helpful in clarifying the approach to syncretism that I am suggesting we take. Although, as I discussed earlier, the Urapmin narrate their history as one of radical change in which the new, postconversion/revival era is discontinuous with that of the past, there is one traditional ritual they still regularly practice. That ritual is pig sacrifice to the nature spirits who make people sick. Although Urapmin pray to God before they make such sacrifices, it is very difficult for them to see these sacrifices as Christian rituals. Should we then suggest the Urapmin are “not really” Christian? The answer in their case is no, because they themselves recognize sacrifice as a deviation from a ritual life they see as primarily aimed at achieving their paramount religious goal of Christian salvation and because, through prayer and discussion and the involvement of female Christian ritual specialists in the sacrificial process, they work hard to situate sacrifice in relation to

9. Needham (1972) is the exception to this generalization. Since he aims to banish “belief” from the anthropological lexicon, he plays up the deconstructive possibilities inherent in these two broad meanings of the term rather than rendering a judgment as to which one might be more broadly applicable across cultures. Valeri (2001, 34–38) offers brief but useful critical readings of both Needham and Smith.

their Christian commitments. In the overall logic of their religious life, their belief in the efficacy of sacrifice is clearly subordinated to their belief in the salvational power of Christian worship. That subordination restricts the use of sacrifice to highly marked occasions of illness and ensures that discourse on it is fragmentary and fleeting. It is this kind of data, data that pertain to how different religious beliefs are put into relation to one another in practice, that allows for an accurate determination of what kind of culture might be called Christian.¹⁰

If we take “belief in” statements to be in essence statements of value in Weber’s (1946) or Dumont’s (1980, 1986) sense—elements of a culture that hierarchically organize other elements—I can summarize the point I have been making by saying that in deciding whether to look at a culture as Christian what is important is not some kind of weighing of the number of Christian ideas its members have picked up against the number of traditional ones they retain.¹¹ Rather we should consider which values are organizing the relations between ideas. We should ask which ideas are considered most important and which are understood only through their relations to more valued ones. Put otherwise, cultural mixtures are organized. Where they are organized in large part by Christian values, then it makes sense to call them Christian cultures. Statements about what people “believe in” are generally a good clue to the values that organize their cultures, whereas their “believe that” statements are not so helpful in this regard. Thus it is through a shift to looking at belief in the “believe in” sense that the study of belief can be pressed into service by an anthropology of Christianity.

10. I find Stewart’s (1991, 11–12) discussion of syncretism in the Greek case helpful in specifying the kind of account for which I am calling (and note that his is one of the only attempts I have seen to define explicitly what should count as Christianity for anthropological purposes): “One of the tests for determining whether we are dealing with a tolerable transformation of a doctrinal cosmology or with a conflicting or altogether new cosmology is to establish the basic structure of the former. For Christianity—in the briefest and most schematic terms—this consists of a hierarchical, monotheistic arrangement, with God at its pinnacle in heaven, the Devil at its nadir in hell, and humanity living in the world in between. The Narrative of Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection then provides the model for human movement on this landscape. The Orthodox Church is no doubt correct in maintaining that local preoccupation with the various *exotica* involves non-Christian elements, but it must be shown that such elements orient a significantly different cosmological structure or motivate a different ‘salvation idiom’ (Obeyesekere 1966, 22) for this to be evidence of a different religion.” From the point of view of the “believe in” model I am developing here, it is people’s commitment to the Christian salvation idiom rather than simply their assent to the proposition that the Christian cosmological structure truly represents what exists that is crucial in the situation Stewart discusses.

11. Elsewhere I present readings of Weber and Dumont demonstrating that my use of the notion of value is derived in key respects from theirs (Robbins 1994, 2004a).

Conclusion

I have tried in this paper to work toward an anthropology of Christianity by examining some of the impediments that the deep structure of anthropological thinking puts in the way of our calling convert cultures Christian. Foremost among these impediments is what I have called the anthropological commitment to continuity thinking—the kind of thinking that sees change as slow and conservative of the past and rewards those who claim to be examining the complexities of people’s enduring cultures. As Palmié (1995, 92) notes: “Our public identity (as well as our careers) in no small measure hinges upon our ability to represent certain social realities as ‘authentically different’ (and, if possible, traditionally so).” I have tried to show that we are aided in our efforts to live up to this standard by a view of time and a conception of belief that lend themselves to arguments for cultural continuity, and I have suggested some alternative ways of looking at these matters that are better fitted to helping us determine when it might be interesting to identify people as Christian and also (more generally and in this paper mostly by implication) when it might be most interesting to look at a culture as one that has changed.

Before concluding, it might be useful to consider three objections to the argument of this paper that, I would submit, somewhat miss its point. The first objection has to do with the propriety of working with an ideal-typical version of Christianity such as the one I presented when looking at the difference between Christian and anthropological notions of discontinuity and belief. This ideal-typical version of Christianity is one that stresses discontinuity and the importance of belief, and, as I noted in a footnote above, it is a model that in its entirety is most closely approached in reality by some kinds of Protestantism. It is in Protestantism, and particularly in various strands of evangelical Protestantism, that one finds the greatest valuation of discontinuity in all three domains I discussed (history, conversion, eschatology). Were one to turn to Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, or Mormonism one would see a greater emphasis on continuity in many domains, though the interest in discontinuity would not be absent (see Burdick 1993; Csordas 2002, 34; Lester 2003; McGuire 1982, 50; and Greeley 2004 on Catholicism; Forbess n.d. on Orthodoxy; and Cannell 2005, 349–50 on Mormonism). And again, it is Protestantism that tends to most forcefully define religious adherence primarily as a matter of believing things (albeit using “belief” in the “believe in” rather than the “believe that” sense), while other branches of Christianity often give ritual participation a greater role in this regard.

My point in constructing this Protestant-inflected ideal type is not to suggest that it represents the “essence” of Christianity; even as regards Protestantism, it does not begin to capture the variety of conceptions that exist among different denominations. In the context of this paper, I have deployed it because I think that something like such a Protestant model

represents the most general one anthropologists have in mind when they think about Christianity (cf. Cannell 2005) and that one reason the anthropology of Christianity has had such trouble getting off the ground is that ideas about time and belief that are important in this model are so foreign to anthropological assumptions about these phenomena. Furthermore, I have wanted to suggest that it is when anthropologists encounter convert cultures whose religion most closely approximates this model that they have had the hardest time studying people as Christians.

Beyond justifying the use of an ideal-typical notion of Christianity in terms of its value in relation to my argument about why the anthropology of Christianity has been so late to develop, I would note that such a model might also be considered useful in framing exactly the kinds of comparative questions such an anthropology ought to address. If readers find this model foreign to the kinds of Christianity they know best, this is a good indication that variation in ideas of discontinuity and belief across various kinds of Christianity would repay comparative study. They are not the only areas in which such study would be relevant, of course, and some recent work has shaped up other comparative issues, such as the varied relations between the transcendental and the mundane (Robbins 2003a, 196–97; Cannell 2005), the kinds of semiotic ideologies different kinds of Christianity have developed in order to comprehend communication across those domains (Keane n.d.; Engelke n.d.), and the nature of conversion in different Christian traditions and situations (Hefner 1993; Buckser and Glazier 2003). Discontinuity and belief might well invite similar comparative work. The purpose of this paper, however, has been not to carry out such comparative analyses but rather, with the use of an ideal-typical construction of Christianity, to clear some anthropological ground upon which they might flourish.

A second objection to my argument might be that, as Tiedemann (1983–84, 92) puts it, “history always encompasses both continuity and discontinuity” and that each requires the existence of the other to have any meaning. Given these points, unimpeachable on a general level, my emphasis on discontinuity alone in this paper might appear to be at best one-sided and perhaps even simpleminded. But I have chosen such an extreme emphasis only in the face of what I am claiming is an equally extreme emphasis on continuity in the work of most anthropologists. In the face of the existing disciplinary bias in favor of continuity, a simple call for balance would be unlikely to dislodge old habits. It is these habits that lead anthropologists to discount Christian converts’ claims to have experienced radical discontinuity as an overheated rhetoric that tells us little about the reality of their lives or cultures. Only by developing models of what cultural discontinuity might be—models that in their fullest development will need to acknowledge continuity in its place but not allow it in all cases to stand as the dominant tendency—will anthropologists be able to reckon with kinds of cultural change that at present remain largely invisible to the discipline.

A third critical response might be that in this virtually postcultural era talk of defining a culture as Christian is a little beside the point. The very idea of trying to identify a culture as one thing or another is sure to sound misguided to ears trained on talk of flow and hybridity and societies without boundaries. It is also likely to sound naively essentialist. And if this were not enough to make the question of whether a particular culture is Christian a bad one to ask, then one might add the charge that the answer it seeks should be one for theologians, not anthropologists, to deliver (cf. MacMullen 1984, 3). All of this would be true if anthropologists, even some who hardly believe in the notion of culture any more, did not persist in asserting that the people they study are not Christian because they still live their lives in something akin to traditional terms. In other words, as long as anthropologists claim that some people are only nominal Christians and that this is so because of the influence their traditions have on them, then the question of when a culture might be called “Christian” will perforce remain an anthropological one. Getting beyond this question is something I hope a thriving anthropology of Christianity might achieve, but it appears that in order to launch that project this question of when a culture is Christian has to be raised. It has been the burden of this paper to raise it in what I hope will be an ethnographically and theoretically productive way.

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Comments

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I suspect that more casual readers of Robbins's fine essay will be surprised by its central claim: that continuity thinking is the main obstacle to the emergence of an anthropology of Christianity. For most of anthropology's history anthropologists have tended to associate the arrival of Christianity in indigenous societies with revolutionary change. Some years ago, Beidelman (1982, 74) wrote that "missionaries may be considered the most extreme and culturally pervasive of all colonists, attempting social change and dominion in their most radical forms." When I was on my way to Papua New Guinea in 1981, a senior anthropologist in Australia advised me to choose a different field site; Collingwood Bay had been thoroughly Christianized (the reason I chose it), and there was "nothing left to study."

Much of the work by anthropologists on missionaries and local Christianity over the past quarter-century has been written against such dismissals (e.g., Barker 1992; Douglas 2001). While we have differed in terms of our topical focus, our general aim has been to document agency, particularly that of the targets of missionary activities. And because Christianity has tended to be strongly associated in anthropologists' minds with acculturation and colonial incorporation, our accounts have tended to be weighted toward documenting resistances, appropriations, and ironic but often creative misunderstandings. The Comaroffs are masters at this. I share the misgivings of their many critics, reiterated here by Robbins, yet I still consider *Of Revelation and Revolution* among the most significant and original contributions by anthropologists to the study of Christian missions during the colonial era.

While I think that Robbins's critique would have benefited from a more comprehensive review of the short history of this emerging subfield, I accept that he is trying to shift the center of debate to a new space where the framework is provided by comparison to the anthropology of other "world" religions like Buddhism or Islam. From this perspective, continuity thinking is likely the major obstacle. It operates in two directions: first, skepticism about the depth and sincerity of converts' grasp of the Christianity and, second, a tendency to attribute Christian evangelists' motivations and actions to their own cultural backgrounds. In both cases, Christianity tends to get sidelined as an independent force. In the first, the persistence of "traditional" practices connected with, say, witchcraft and sorcery bolsters a claim that Christianity forms only a superficial coating to the indigenous culture. In the second, Christianity becomes a stand-in for more profound

changes. In Horton's (1971, 1975) essays on African conversion, Christianity and Islam alike are described as catalysts for changes "already in the air" having to do with a shift from a micro to a macro conception of the cosmos. Whitehouse (1998) has similarly presented the particulars of Christian doctrines and practices as variant historical contingencies obscuring a deeper systematic transformation in cognitive systems. As with the Comaroffs, these approaches sideline Christianity, presenting conversion as a surface manifestation of a more fundamental process by which an indigenous system gets replaced by one nurtured within Western culture.

Robbins makes these points with his typical energy and clarity. I find his argument convincing, and I am attracted by his vision of an anthropology of Christianity. Yet I doubt that a focus upon change based on a more nuanced appreciation of belief and time will bring us much closer to his goal. Part of my skepticism comes from the feeling that continuity and change are too broad and ambiguous as categories for the job that needs to be done and part of it from the nature of his "ideal type." Robbins's call for a focus on change comes at a time when most mainline churches have embraced the idea that Christianity is compatible with most local cultural expressions. Converts themselves may take a different view, especially in sectarian circumstances (e.g., Jebens 2005), but in my experience many local Christians take it as axiomatic that indigenous cultures and Christianity are mutually supportive. There are many other Christians, of course, who don't. A tension between exclusivist and accommodating modes runs through much of Christian history. Robbins's ideal type is just too constraining if we are talking about Christianity in general.

The real challenge for anthropologists is to begin paying more attention to the distinctive *content* of Christian institutions and expressions, both in recent times and over the long term (Hefner 1993). This calls for an interdisciplinary effort, engaging with historians, theologians, sociologists, and missiologists (e.g., Kan 1999). This is, in fact, what the best amongst the anthropologists now studying Christianity are doing, perhaps none so creatively as Robbins himself. It may be time to move past the critiques of those who neglect the subject and focus more on the innovative work being done by others. I can't think of anyone better positioned to do this than Robbins, and I look forward to his next essay on the subject.

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Robbins's article is a welcome contribution to the evolving debate on the relationship between anthropology and Christianity. Like his remarkable monograph (Robbins 2004a), this persuasive piece demonstrates Robbins's talent for making it

easy to read about difficult subjects. Indeed, he even makes it look easy to debate the multiple varieties of Christian practice without disappearing into an abyss of definitional (or denominational) contradictions. This clear-mindedness can only encourage those whom he invites to join in the endeavour of creating a systematic comparison of different forms of Christianity in local contexts.

Two of the most significant aspects of Robbins's approach are his refusal to treat the *content* of (any given form of) Christianity as less important than its social and institutional mode of delivery and his determination to think ethnographically about how people experience change. Paying attention to the content of Christian teaching has in the past often been done better by historians than by anthropologists. As Robbins's account of the Comaroffs' work demonstrates, even the most distinguished anthropologists have sometimes found it hard to believe that anyone could really be interested in or motivated by Christianity. It is not, of course, that the Comaroffs are wrong to ask us to understand the context of "practical religion," and it is certainly true that some Christian variants stress the inner life more than others. But, like Robbins, I am not convinced that this implies that converts—still less missionaries—were indifferent to Christian teaching.

The ways in which people pay attention to radically new ideas such as a newly introduced Christianity or a new colonial language may sometimes be manifested through extremely subtle forms of behaviour (Rafael 1988). Equally subtle and just as easy to misinterpret are the clues to the experience of people who, like missionaries, may be striving to conform perfectly to models of orthodox Christian thought and action (Pels 1999; Hovland 2006). Anthropologists often produce a very "flat" account of such techniques of the self in contrast to the ethnographic treatment of specialists in other religious traditions.

Robbins's emphasis on an ethnography of change is equally helpful, for it effects a key shift away from much sociological writing on conversion, in which the adoption of Christianity is explained as a secondary aspect of social and economic transformations in capitalist modernity. That modernity (whether viewed in a Weberian or in a Marxist frame) was the causal trajectory was long treated as axiomatic, but the best writers nevertheless shifted restlessly under its weight, wondering with David Martin (1990), for example, why Protestant Pentecostalism *in particular* should be so appealing in Latin America as to produce mass conversions. One strength of Robbins's approach is that he wants to describe converts as persons whose conversion to Christianity is not a knee-jerk response to the dislocations of modernity but involves people from a particular antecedent culture thinking about and thinking with the imported ideas which the religion brings. Thus Robbins suggests that Protestantisms of the Armenian kind may tend to construct a long-lasting focus on the ethical dilemmas of old and new ideas in tension, an interesting suggestion which opens up possibilities for empirical comparison.

Robbins recognizes that all Christianity may be "good to think" about change, being itself founded on the idea of radical change. In agreeing with him and others on this, however, I might add some qualifications to his claim that anthropologists have been adherents of "continuity thinking." He is generally right in pointing to a disciplinary resistance to the conception of cultures as less than enduring. At the same time, to my mind (and as his own treatment of the Comaroffs' work demonstrates) this resistance is bracketed within a tacit disciplinary acceptance of the immense power of a certain kind of change, which economic modernity is assumed to bring. The entanglement of anthropology in the notion of "salvage ethnography" implies this, as does the "globalization" debate; assertions about "enduring culture" may attempt an intellectual and political defense against the idea of homogeneous world transformation. But this view of modernity as irreversible and unrepeatable change is itself an ideological assertion modeled on Christian tropes including that of "transcendence" (in the sense of having "gone beyond" boundaries of time and kinds of being) as well as conversion.

The idea of conversion is itself variably salient in different cultures (Harris 2006) and in some places may be treated as essentially "forgettable" (Gow 2006) while other cultures may themselves be premised on a continuous prediction of radical surprise, with the result that the "newness" of Christianity is only to be expected (Rutherford 2006). In that case, the comparative exercise which Robbins proposes would extend to an investigation of how cultures receiving particular Christianities think about change (or not) not only *through* Christianity but also in ways not solely attributable to it.

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Robbins aims to clear some theoretical space for ethnographers of Christianity to cultivate grounds of debate, but his argument has much wider resonances—both historical and theoretical. We might think, for instance, of numerous controversies over the "real" depth of the apparent religious ruptures prompted by reformed Christianity in post-medieval Europe (see, e.g., Duffy 1992), or we might consider the novel way Robbins presents for tackling a perennial question for anthropology: How we are to find a satisfactory ethnographic vocabulary to describe—even to acknowledge—radical cultural transformation? If Robbins is right in saying that what is required is some shifts in the "deep structures" of the discipline as a whole, there is surely considerable irony in his stance. We might assume that our informants see the world through broadly stable categories of perception, but it is *we* who are the conceptual conservatives, using ethnography to naturalize fields as sites of cultural reproduction.

The argument, then, is that we need a "Reformation" in

anthropology. While Robbins's piece focuses on temporality and Christianity, it is also surely about the broader cosmology of our discipline. Despite constant talk of the need to understand global processes, our assertions of continuities over time are still often complemented by assumptions of discontinuities in space or at least by descriptions of cultures as distinct islands of perceptual and conceptual stability (hence the epistemological totemism of invoking "context" as our badge of identity [Dilley 1999]). This point recalls that made by Palmié, quoted towards the end of Robbins's paper, referring to our disciplinary need—political, theoretical, methodological—to represent social realities as "authentically different." One might almost rephrase Palmié's words as "different and *therefore* authentic." Here, then, is another (though not an exclusive) reason for Christianity's being an anthropological anomaly: its spiritually motivated emphasis on temporal rupture combines with a relative disregard for the spatial confining of culture, as the shift from Old Testament to New implies a bursting of the territorial boundaries of the sacred.

Given more room, there would probably have been a more complex story for Robbins to tell about the apparent homogeneity and secularity of anthropological temporality. To what extent have theoretical tropes ranging from the rite of passage to the cultural and economic tensions of historical materialism invoked at least temporary—or imagined—images of rupture? After all, Marxism has provided its own versions of messianism in the social sciences. I wonder also how Robbins thinks his arguments concerning continuity thinking and Christianity fare when the ethnographic gaze is applied to Western contexts. Is ethnographic tolerance of rupture more evident when examining informants who have long been aware of their own historicity (understood in Western terms), or do other boundary-marking devices come into play to define such Christianity as an inauthentic object of inquiry? And what of contexts in which one modality of Christianity displaces another? Have anthropologists been guilty of seeing some ruptures as historical—domesticated—and therefore able to be acknowledged and others as more recent and more threatening?

Robbins uses his fieldwork among the Urapmin to provide a counterexample to the Tswana, allowing him to juxtapose the "sudden" conversion of the one with the extended conversation presented in the other. The contrast is trenchantly argued and informative, but the two examples differ hugely in temporal and social scale, and I would have welcomed more analysis of cases in which informants overtly dispute the extent, nature, and benefits of discontinuity as a project or social hierarchies militate against apparently sudden cultural shifts in locating "trust" (in the sense of "believing in" an entity). Such examples would perhaps illustrate more clearly the utility or otherwise of deploying continuity/discontinuity as a basis of cross-cultural comparison in a budding anthropology of Christianity. More generally, are we to

regard Christianity as alone among the "world religions" in providing a suspicious vehicle for cultural rupture?

Robbins is surely correct to identify Protestant, evangelical Christianity as a prime focus for much contemporary anthropological attention (and mistrust). A major task, as he appreciates, is to work out how the dimensions and debates of a much broader anthropology of Christianity can incorporate but also transcend the particular worries we have about the links between such evangelicalism and modernity. It would be a further striking irony if his characteristically brilliant and bravura piece—prompted in part precisely by the study of missionizing Protestantism—were to play an important role in the "conversion" of anthropology to a new way of thinking.

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Robbins calls our attention to what has been a blind spot in anthropology; cultural discontinuity. It is not that we have not handled change before; rather, the argument has been that continuity is only apparent and change is an unavoidable part of history (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; for Melanesia, see Carrier 1992; Thomas 1989, 1992). What, then, makes Robbins's argument different? First, the previous anti-continuity argument, coming from what we might call the "invention of tradition" movement, points to change where continuity is the ideology. Robbins does the opposite, pointing to a culture wherein radical change is the ideology. Change is not "hidden beneath the surface" of continuity. Rather, it is a dominant value of Christian culture.

Robbins shows us that Christianity is based on messianic, discontinuous time. Understanding Christian culture, then, implies understanding these dimensions as part of the cultural system. This is hard for anthropology, which developed as a discipline in direct opposition to Christianity (see also Cannell 2005). The outline of a theory of Christianity can then also be the outline of a theory of cultural discontinuity. Furthermore, if we had an idea of what Christian convert cultures are, we might also come to understand their social manifestations. Although it may be too large an argument to bring up here, I will briefly mention my own analysis of Pentecostal Christianity in Melanesia, Vanuatu, since I think it basically supports Robbins's argument.

As Robbins points out, anthropology is inclined to think of sociality as unfolding in a continuous motion based on our concept of linear time. My experience with evangelical Christians in Vanuatu has made me realize that the Christian inclination toward discontinuity and change manifests itself not only in history, conversion, and eschatology but also in a vision of social order. The value of change, expressed powerfully in the belief in rupture at the time of the second coming (see also Strathern and Stewart 1997, 2000), gains

significance also in people's imagining of a social order that must break fundamentally with the previous one. This new social order is achieved not after the second coming but as a result of conversion itself. When I asked people from a number of different evangelical churches during a recent field trip to Port Vila what signified conversion to Christianity, they spoke of change not only with respect to belief but also in one's behaviour, one's relationships with others, and, most important, one's view of society. Change is tied not only to individual change but also to the social system. In Vanuatu the social system which has to change—in the belief of the Christians—is tied to all the apparatuses of the national state. People say that independence, which Vanuatu gained in 1980 after having been part of a shared English and French colonial regime, has failed because people were not real Christians. This is the reason their politicians remain corrupt and their national economy is based on foreign loans and donations. The dominant churches at the time of the achievement of independence, Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, and Seventh Day Adventist, had not converted people's hearts. Now, however, when people convert more and more to the evangelical, Pentecostal churches, they become truly Christians. For them Christianity is a social project dedicated to change and to achieving a new kind of independence. Each and every day these people pray for the salvation of the nation as a road to a really independent social existence. This is to some extent comparable to Robbins's own material from the Urapmin, whose colonial experience led them to challenge their pre-existing cultural schemes. They needed change. They needed a cultural scheme that could make sense of the world. They needed to believe in rupture.

Believing in rupture is difficult not only because it is distant from the anthropological "belief that" as Robbins has argued. Is it the case that cultures based on a notion of fundamental change in both history, conversion, eschatology, and social order really must change in the anthropological sense? Is there a difference between "believing in change" and really changing? Although this is an interesting question, it should not get in the way of acknowledging change as a value in the Christian cultural system. Believing in rupture as Pentecostal Christians in Vanuatu do leads to changes in their social world that are recognizable to the anthropologist as "social and cultural change."

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Robbins's article is a fine contribution to the discussion of the discipline's long-standing reluctance to consider religious change and conversion among its subjects of study. Though such reluctance has been diminishing lately, one can still find

colleagues who question the need to study converted Indian peoples because they are not really "ethnic Indians" any more. The "traditionalist" sectors of communities have often been considered more worthy of attention. As Dow and Sandstrom (1999) have noted, this approach is now questionable, partly because the Indian population has converted in such large numbers to evangelical and Pentecostal religions (Garma 2001). It is unnecessary here to repeat the criticism of the outdated tendency to fault religious converts as the root of community division and the "penetration" of foreign ideologies. As Robbins demonstrates, it is time for anthropology to confront the changing face of religious affiliation of its subjects and attempt to understand it. As he has shown elsewhere (Robbins 2004a), members of ethnic indigenous communities may be more willing to abandon their "traditional" rituals for Christianity, as in the case of the prohibition of the brutal initiation rites for male children among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, than anthropologists have admitted. For lack of a better term, I shall call this attitude, whereby anthropologists decide what their subjects should maintain of their "traditional culture," "essentialism of the native." Perhaps this critique is not entirely new, but Robbins is correct in saying that this attitude has limited the scope of anthropology's understanding of religious change. It should be mentioned, of course, that missionaries and religious institutions often share this approach to indigenous populations (Salamone and Adams 1997).

With regard to belief, a promising approach would be to consider the nature not only of Christian belief but also of Christian "unbelief." As Mary Douglas (1970) has stated, non-believers are not exclusive to Christianity, but refusal to recognize God does have its own particular formulation. As the Spanish ethnographer and historian Julio Caro Baroja (1974, 1985) has shown, people who question the existence of God and the validity of the Catholic Church have long existed in Mediterranean society, where there is a deep strain of popular anticlericalism. Conversion to Pentecostalism in Mexico is often accompanied by the emergence of persons who say that they no longer belong to any religion at all. As one Totonac told me in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, "I have been through many religions, and I know now that they are all nothing but lies." These persons even show up in the official Mexican census figures as persons who are not affiliated with any religion. Men and women, Indian and non-Indian, rural and urban, they are always more frequent where the percentage of Evangelicals, Protestants, and Pentecostals is higher (Garma 2002).

Apostates abandon the true faith either to follow a false creed or to become nonbelievers. During the Hispanic colonial period in the Americas, apostasy was a serious crime as Indians abandoned their Christian conversions to return to the ways of "idolatry" (Gruzinski 1998). Evangelical churches in Mexico are plagued by second- and third-generation apostasy, though in this case not a return to any "idolatry" but rather the abandonment of religion (Bowen

1996). Apostates do not exist in Amerindian or African-derived religions; it is quite clearly an element of Christianity. Robbins offers an interesting discussion of conversion. Apostasy may be considered a form of conversion that involves the rejection of monotheism and the religious practices of its followers. Robbins writes of the importance of understanding Christian belief. Why not go a little farther to examine the nonbelief of ex-Christians?

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This is a great essay. The temporal frames of Christianity are important both in their own right and because of the enormous influence they have had, far beyond the confines of the Christian and post-Christian world. Furthermore, the temporal frames of anthropological thinking need to be made explicit. I would wish both to modify the argument and to extend it. First, to write of “Christianity as a culture” or “Christian cultures” as Robbins does begs many questions. There is no doubt that fundamentalist evangelical Protestantism in various guises has become immensely influential across the world, but to take it as the default position—even for polemical purposes—seems to me as problematic as projecting a particular understanding of Islamic fundamentalism onto the variety of ways in which Muslims practice their faith. Further, to propose a particular feature of Christianity as a heuristic for establishing whether a culture is Christian or not incurs all the well-known problems of imposing theological definitions upon popular practice. I don’t think that Robbins’s suggestion of the hope for salvation will do. Some people (for example, peasants in the Andean region who have not been reeducated by reform Catholicism or evangelicalism) consider salvation unattainable given the way they live and still identify themselves as Christian.

I would argue that what distinguishes Christians as Christian is conversion itself (Harris 2006). Conversion, as Robbins argues, involves the rejection of a past that is seen as pagan or false. It is this assumption of the radical and absolute nature of the break that is constitutive of a Christian identity. How that break is worked out—and worked through—in personal, theological, and cultural terms is another matter, but the persistence of sin suggests that the pre-Christian past may return in uncontrollable ways. What impact it has on people’s understandings of the future (such as salvation) is also a matter for investigation.

I agree that we should not discount people’s own commitment to a temporal organization of rupture. Robbins is persuasive in his analysis of anthropology’s ambivalence about the reality of Christian conversion as a break of this kind, and his reading of the Comaroffs suggests that our profession is far more ready to posit other kinds of temporal rupture, such as colonialism. It may be that this ambivalence is, as he

suggests, an effect of the culture concept, but surely the play of continuity and discontinuity is part of everyone’s temporal experience. Even a historian as committed to continuity as Fernand Braudel invokes discontinuity in unexpected ways (Harris 2004). And, conversely, even those who have made a break with the past, such as through conversion, may find that it returns to haunt them. It is not like normal forgetting, since a conversion narrative requires the rejected past to be remembered, at least as transgressive.

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Robbins here brings together some of his previously voiced themes regarding the anthropology of Christianity (or lack thereof) with a fresh and important reading of time and belief as they inhibit the anthropological study of Christianity *qua* Christianity. In the hope that this piece will not be primarily viewed as a critique of the Comaroffs’ work, I would point out that there are other literatures Robbins might have used to illustrate the ethnographic sublimation of Christianity. For example, in the anthropology of Latin American Christianity, most scholars have taken one of two directions. Some, like the Comaroffs, have turned to themes of resistance, syncretism, and continuity (people never really convert to what they *think* they’re converting to), especially in studies of Catholicism and “folk Catholicism.” Others, largely in studies of Protestantism, have focused on pragmatic, economic and political concerns, seldom venturing into the questions of faith and conversion that dominate the thinking of these Christians themselves (the conversion is always about something else). The Mayanist John Watanabe (1996, 3) noted this tendency among those writing about conversion among the Maya when he said that they tended to treat it “either in terms of larger cultural continuities in which little has ‘really’ changed, or in terms of ideological rationalizations of very real social, economic and political changes dictated by a globalizing, transnational world.” In other words, “religion” (i.e., culture) never changes; it is only behavior, discourse, and identity that change, and for reasons other than those expressed by converts themselves. Notable exceptions (such as Diane Austin-Broos’s [1997] study of Jamaican Pentecostals) only make the prevailing tendencies more apparent.

Robbins’s point about the ethnographic absence of Christianity in non-Western studies is also supported by a counterexample, the anthropology of Christianity in North America and Europe. Here, anthropologists such as Bramadat (2000), Greenhouse (1986), Peacock and Tyson (1989), Coleman (2000), Frederick (2003), and Harding (2000) (to name just a few) manage to treat Christianity as fully formed—an internally and culturally integrated system—even as they explore the same economic, political, linguistic, and social elements of the religion developed by others. Similarly, an-

thropological studies of conversion in the West such as those of Harding (1987), Stromberg (1993), and Luhmann (2004) seem to be able to take seriously the religious motives and convictions of Christian subjects in ways that discomfit many encountering Christianity outside these cultural spheres. How have these anthropologists managed it? Robbins's implication is that they do not have to confront the question of conversion in the cultural sense brought out in settings where Christianity seems "foreign"—that is, they can sidestep the whole issue of cultural continuity and discontinuity. In dealing with Europeans or North Americans, there is no problem with the traditional anthropological views of time; Christianity is indigenous to these people even if they declare they have, in fact, "converted."

Robbins's critique of "empty time" as the central concept limiting such consideration of discontinuity opens up ways for Christian anthropologists to think about culture in new ways. While some Christian anthropologists made significant contributions in the early years of the discipline (e.g., Lienhardt [see Clifford 1997]; Pike 1967; Nida and Taber 1982), in recent years many Christian anthropologists have employed this understanding of time, placing their own faith outside culture. Culture is reduced to a functionalist/cognitive system incapable of engaging the deeply held convictions of their own faith community (see Howell 2006, 309–12; Rynkiewicz 2002). For this reason, Christian academics have largely eschewed the notion of "Christian cultures," emphasizing the transcendent/noncultural nature of Christianity (or, at least, the "Christian message") (Kraft 1979; Lingenfelter 1992). Robbins's notion of "Christian cultures" has potential pitfalls if it is taken to mean that a culture is consistent with the values/ideals of Christianity or that there is one "Christian" manifestation of "Christian culture." However, if we keep in mind his definition of cultures in which people come to see the world in explicitly Christian ways, "Christian culture" seems entirely appropriate as a way to conceptualize particular cultural contexts.

What Robbins provides is a way out of a theoretical briar patch. For anthropologists of Christianity, he removes the theoretical inertia preventing the exploration of Christianity as a cultural-religious system. For Christian anthropologists (and theologians and historians), he provides a theoretical starting point for critiquing some of the ways anthropology has hindered Christians' own thinking about culture and context. Finally, for scholars outside the (anthropological) study of Christianity, he clears a path for understanding anthropological research on this largest of global religious movements.

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Robbins argues that anthropology has been very largely a science of continuity. Cultural values are thought to be enduring, change slow and conservative. This emphasis on cul-

tural continuity makes it hard for anthropologists to believe people who claim to have experienced a sudden change of values; this is not, according to anthropological theory, how culture works. Continuity thinking, I agree, is the key to understanding this state of affairs. However, one of the root causes given by Robbins for anthropologists' problem with Christianity, the clash between anthropological and Christian notions of time, strikes me as problematic. First, anthropologists have been very keen on stressing a variety of culturally specific time concepts based on principles other than the continuous progression of historical time without finding this an obstacle to their open-mindedness with regard to these concepts. Second, the notion of temporal discontinuities, with one time ending and another beginning in an instant, is shared by many religions, notably Islam, the anthropology of which Robbins would like to see as a model for an emerging anthropology of Christianity.

Why, then, is especially evangelical Christian talk subject to a kind of doubt that other fieldwork data in general are spared? When anthropologists are confronted with a statement such as "After a funeral, the dead hold a party in the graveyard at night," they do not normally consider it their job to judge whether this statement is true for the person who made it. We start from the premise that it is and attempt to understand the ways in which it makes sense to that person. In contrast, a statement such as "I have given up all the old gods and only believe in Jesus Christ" tends to be taken not to truly represent what the person feels and thinks, the job of the anthropologist being to unearth what the talk about Jesus Christ is *really* about.

As Robbins claims, continuity thinking is the key to understanding why anthropologists are loath to accept Christianity as a genuine cultural element, irrespective of what Christians say or do. But, in contrast to Robbins, I would argue that the most important reason for continuity thinking is the anthropological emphasis on cultural particularism. Following this emphasis, people can only be thought to be attracted and committed to a new cultural element—evangelical Christianity, for example—which has become or is in the process of becoming rooted in a particular context because they render it meaningful within the framework of traditions they are already familiar with.

Taking the example of Malagasy Seventh Day Adventists (Keller 2005), one could easily argue that, although they profess that the ancestors are but the devil in disguise, they remain concerned with ancestral power precisely by demonizing it. Their new religious commitment would remain anchored in tradition, and Seventh Day Adventism in Madagascar would be understood as a perfectly Malagasy phenomenon *fully explicable in culturally specific terms*. According to this line of reasoning, Seventh Day Adventism has an utterly different meaning for converts in Madagascar than it has for converts, say, in England or Swaziland. Of course, there is some truth to this argument. However, to stop here or to privilege, from the start, this kind of analysis would mean to miss what for

most Malagasy Adventists is the key attraction of Adventism: the intellectual excitement offered by the process of Bible study. This key attraction cannot be understood, in its essential aspects, in terms of the particularities of Malagasy culture. Adventism is attractive to a certain number of people in Madagascar not primarily because it can be hitched to what they are familiar with but for what it offers in its own right.

If the attraction of a new cultural element is perceived to be explicable only in terms of the particularities of the culture within which it has become anchored, radical and rapid cultural change is impossible. This is why continuity thinking, based on cultural particularism, can account neither for the importance of Bible study among Malagasy Seventh Day Adventists nor for the Urapmin's experience of a fundamental change of values.

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There is much to address in this brilliant essay. I will focus on only one issue. Robbins argues that anthropologists tend to think in terms of continuity. He rightly points out that this continuity thinking tends to treat skeptically the new Christian's claim that everything has changed in his or her world. He suggests that one reason anthropologists tend not to appreciate this felt experience of radical change is that they tend to think about belief as "belief that"—as propositional commitments held with a degree of uncertainty—rather than "belief in," deeply held orientations to reality. He points out, in passing, that we need an anthropological theory of learning that would help us understand how such fundamental shifts take place. What might such a theory look like?

It would begin, of course, by taking seriously the experience of conversion that Robbins accurately describes as a radical discontinuity. That radical discontinuity is well articulated in the evangelical Protestantism central to his account. New Christians in this tradition often say that everything is different, that they are indeed reborn. And yet, clearly, much of what they believe and do remains continuous with their preconversion selves. The first job of an anthropological theory of learning would be to explain this paradox. One might do so most successfully—following Robbins's lead—by theorizing the social creation of an interpretive frame. The observation that human reasoning takes place within a symbolic context is of course an insight as anthropologically mature as the work of Evans-Pritchard. From this perspective, individuals reason coherently within the web of meaning spun around them by their culture. Yet that description glosses over the observation—subtly analyzed by cognitive scientists—that individuals deploy many such frames and that they do so in response to social cues.

Ask a child if there is liquid in an empty teapot, and the child may say no. Tell the child that you are having a tea party in a let's-pretend voice and hold up the teapot and ask her whether it is full of tea, and she may well say yes. This example also illustrates that humans judge the ontological status of their interpretive context: as imaginative or realistic, as supported by practical experience or by trustworthy authority. Developmental psychologists such as Paul Harris have demonstrated that even young children will distinguish the ontological status of tables, germs, monsters, and God, each supported by different kinds of evidence.

What seems to be happening when new Christians convert is that they adopt a cognitive framework in which the ontological reality of Christ is judged to be more real than everyday reality—what Geertz called the "really real." They may alter few of the causal or practical accounts they give of the world—they still see a mechanic when their car breaks down—but they frame those accounts as proximate, explained by and in reference to a transcendent divinity. The challenge for an anthropology of Christianity is to understand the social architecture of those nested frames and the social rules which govern and cue their salience to the experience of self and everyday reasoning. For example, new Christians experience God as present in some ways but not in others. They may experience God as speaking to them through prayer but never—if they are judged sane—their next-door neighbor. What social rules of interpretation have they acquired?

The second task of an anthropological theory of learning is to explain how the interpretive frame becomes persuasive. Many years ago the psychologist Daryl Bem wrote of "zero-order beliefs," beliefs so taken for granted that we are apt not to notice them at all. In fact, Christian belief in God is never taken for granted: it needs constant reinforcement from repeated Sunday services, testimonies, witnessing, and so forth. The goal of religious practice is to create a sense of God as fundamental, as the frame in which one moves and the ground on which one stands, not as a hypothesis to be tested and compared with other potential explanations of the world. The truth of our senses is probably our most primitive zero-order belief: if we did not believe in our senses, we would go mad. And many Christians come to experience God as sensorially present, as felt, heard, seen, even smelled. How they do so is a deeply anthropological question. The answer must draw on the anthropology of the body and of the senses and be linked to the more cognitive questions of when such experiences can be appropriately interpreted and attributed to God.

Much of the current anthropological interest in Christianity has political roots, understandably. What is the matter with Kansas? Robbins points out that a deep anthropology of Christianity will also be an anthropology of experience and that it will help us come to understand how divinity becomes real for its participants.

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Robbins describes two dimensions of Christian time, the grand scale of creation, redemption, and last judgement and the more humble scale of the individual Christian life. As regards the definition of Christianity, he suggests for present purposes an essentially Evangelical, “ideal-typical version” comprising “salvational necessity” and the necessity of radical change in the conduct of the convert’s life. Clarity of definition is a prerequisite for the comparative approaches that Robbins would also like to see, but it runs the risk of transforming Joseph’s coat of many colours—the exuberant multiplicity of Christian traditions and the internal complexities of any single tradition—into a homespun monochrome tunic. If indeed anthropologists have neglected the study of Christian societies, the opposite can be said of historians; arguably the former might learn from the latter.

The complications entailed by conversion include joining a group of Christian people, a church. No one can become a Christian in complete isolation. In some Christian traditions during certain periods, conceptions of the church are central (Pelikan 1984, 1989), while elsewhere they can be surprisingly hidden (Noll 2002). Even so, conversion is unthinkable without Christian community, the locus of dialogue, of linguistic and cultural translation, communication, miscommunication, and uncertainty (Pardo 2005; Durston n.d.). Jonathan Z. Smith has suggested that when Paul wrote about the spirit (*pneuma*) of God, some at least of the Corinthians whom he was addressing understood him to be referring to their departed ancestors, a reciprocal misunderstanding such as has also occurred in contemporary New Guinea (Smith 2004, 340–61) and elsewhere (Rafael 1998; Estenssoro 2003; Zupanov 2005). But is such misunderstanding—or simple inability to communicate—necessarily an index of failure? Wherever Christian missions have reached, Christian liturgical expression, literature, music, visual art, and architecture have to a greater or lesser degree adapted to local tastes and traditions (Bailey 1999). From Christianity’s very origins, the boundaries between a Christian core and surrounding culture or cultures have eluded precise and enduring definition, precisely because these boundaries are inherently porous. At any rate, opinions have varied as to whether it is possible to define artistic traditions, dress codes and the like as Christian or non-Christian (e.g., Guamán Poma 1987, 1121; MacCormack 1991).

Even so, Christian groups do differentiate themselves from the rest of society, thereby inviting judgements about the nature of the Christianity that they have espoused, in which ideal and reality are not the same thing. As Robbins points out, converts claim to be Christians even if “they fail to live up to their own . . . Christian ideals.” Viewed from within a

Christian group, such an admission should occasion no surprise, for claiming that one is living up to the evangelical command “Be ye therefore perfect” (Matthew 5:48), far from enunciating a reality, is more likely to provide proof of presumption (see Gregory 1999, 287). Put differently, the admission of imperfection can also be understood as perceiving oneself in the light of Scripture, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves” (I John 1:8). This paradox is central to Christian identity, whether individual or collective. If Christianity is to be adequately theorized, this factor should be considered.

What of the more specific task of theorizing Christian time? Here likewise, our model should not be too simple. The application of biblical chronology to methods of measuring time that have been and often remain in use outside the West has given biblical chronology a bad name (Trautmann 1995). Furthermore, in the process of being imposed on other chronological and philosophical systems, Christian chronology and conceptions of time have been standardized and simplified almost beyond recognition. This is not merely a matter of ancient history (see Grafton 1995; MacCormack 1998), since contemporary Christian groups also adapt their time frames to those of surrounding societies. For example, however firmly liturgical time—the dates of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost—may have been fixed in ecclesiastical calendars for centuries, it is subject to modification in terms of time as it is lived. Christmas coincides with the winter solstice and Easter with the beginning of spring but only in the Northern Hemisphere—a crucial issue in agricultural societies (Pietri 1984). Besides, the presence of non-Christian others or a non-Christian past can change both the meaning and the observance of Christian festivals (Nirenberg 1996, 200–230; Zuidema 1999). Finally, Christian calendars themselves are works in progress; observances—days of mourning or celebration, pilgrimages, commemorations—fall into desuetude, change their meaning, or are supplanted by new ones (Orsi 2002; Lomnitz 2005).

The topics here broached follow on from Robbins by inviting comparison both among Christian traditions and between Christianity and other religions. In either case, I recommend Smith’s (1982) oblique approaches as a tool for discovering comparables across space and time.

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Robbins’s fine essay highlights the tendency amongst some anthropologists to avoid studying the religious choices made by their subjects. I concur with most of his argument, though as a historian and an Africanist I do not consider it any great revelation. Historians have long been interested in studying changes *and* continuities in religion, and Africanists are well-

exercised in debates (cast in various different terms) about conversion.

In explaining the avoidance of studying religious change, Robbins draws attention to anthropologists' preference for the exotic. Christianity is not quite foreign enough for some researchers. The search for the pristine was subjected to a fascinating debate in this journal two and a half decades ago (Stipe 1980). Robbins's discussion of ways of writing about belief is a valuable and innovative contribution to the debate. It brings to mind Rijk van Dijk's wonderfully candid account of the reception of his ethnographic text by Malawian Pentecostal subjects, who took exception to his representation of the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives (van Dijk and Pels 1996). Robbins could also have discussed the tendency to interpret "cultural conservation" as an aspect of human rights. Researchers who find it difficult to understand indigenous Pentecostals who assault their own cultural heritage have often preferred to conclude that Pentecostalism is simply American cultural imperialism.

Robbins offers a perceptive reading of *Of Revelation and Revolution* which would resonate with many Africanist historians. While the Comaroffs elaborate a sophisticated model of how to write a cultural history of mission, they tell us little about Christian ideas and the indigenous agents who transmitted them. One reason their work caused a stir amongst Africanists was that it challenged a well-established historical/anthropological body of work on the reception and localization of African Christianity (Maxwell 2006). Two strands of that literature are relevant here. The first is a debate initiated by Robin Horton (1971, 1975) in which he contended that conversion to Christianity or Islam could be rendered intelligible or plausible only in terms of existing tendencies in the context of a changing society. The second is a debate with African theologians who have stressed continuity between African traditional religion(s) and Christianity to counter missionary overemphasis on discontinuity and to make a connection with the nation-building aspirations of cultural nationalists (Hastings 1989).

There is no room here to review this literature, but it does provide relevant pointers. Both continuity and discontinuity mark conversion. There can be verbal continuities in the names of God, congruence with food taboos and models of leadership, and the replacement of charms with Catholic medals. Christianity also brings new, powerful ideas about heaven and hell, sin and judgement. It introduces the figures of Christ and Mary, who demand unwavering devotion. In the process of large-scale conversion there must be both continuity and discontinuity from the outset. But psychologically, the element of discontinuity, a faith worth martyrdom, has to override. If converts are to give up a system of belief and practice that has dominated their lives, their worldview, and their public conventions and adopt another religion, they often do so with a rigour that the ethnographer may find excessive. Subsequently, the dimension of continuity will reappear. Once the converts are established they grasp the congruity of much

that went before with their new understanding. The second generation of Christianized children, in particular, who never experienced the rupture of conversion or the old life as a social and spiritual entity, often seek a self-conscious rapprochement with their parents' former culture. Thus the conversion process has a dialectic that is worked out across the years.

This historical model helps us comprehend how the ethnography in Robbins's splendid *Becoming Sinners* shapes his theory. The Urapmin are the first generation to experience evangelical Protestantism. In this context of revival, public confession, the search for purity, and sincerity receive great emphasis. His informants may well talk a good deal more about continuity in a generation's time. One challenge for an anthropology of Christianity would be to trace the dialectic of conversion over generations, locating moments of individual and collective rupture within the grain of social change. Another would be to explore how indigenous traditions of rupture are Christianized (De Creamer, Fox, and Vansina 1976).

It is a pity that Robbins has felt compelled to place such an extreme emphasis on evangelical Protestantism. As he observes, a mature anthropology of Christianity would also need to consider Orthodox, Catholic, and liberal Protestant Christianity. In Catholicism, for instance, cultural change is often slower but can be no less profound. It is surely among female religious orders marked by celibacy, renunciation of motherhood, and separation that the most radical disjuncture with African society is found.

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Though I agree with the major premise of Robbins's paper and with many of the particular judgments he expresses in the course of it, I remain unconvinced by its central argument: that the undeveloped state of the anthropology of Christianity is due mainly to the prevalence of "continuity thinking." If continuity thinking is so general in anthropology, it should have equally affected those who study Islam and Buddhism. I still suppose that the main reason Christianity is *uniquely* undeveloped as an anthropological topic is that, by and large, anthropologists study "other cultures" and have therefore tended to neglect the religious tradition which has been the cultural cradle of their own society.

Robbins urges anthropologists to focus on the discontinuities that attend the processes of cultural change triggered by Christian conversion. I am doubtful whether it is helpful to polarize the theoretical options like this. The form of his argument—a general theoretical case made largely on the basis of one ethnographic instance—is always problematic. A single case may destroy a theory, but it cannot justify one. There is

also the emic/etic problem: we need to give due cognizance to the way “the natives” see things, but we are not bound to align our own analysis of the situation with their view. Urapmin Christians, first converted by Australian Baptists, have latterly undergone a religious revival which expresses a strong sense of rupture from their cultural past. This can be readily paralleled elsewhere in the neo-Pentecostal movement that has flourished round the world since the 1970s. Now, in the West African literature at least, there is a striking split in the lines of interpretation offered of the “born-again” phenomenon. On the one hand there are those who echo the emphasis on rupture and renewal that is salient in the self-representations of the born-again themselves (Meyer 1998; van Dijk 1998). On the other there are those who interpret the attention given to healing and prosperity in born-again practice as a continuation of the “this-worldly” ethos of “primal” or traditional religion (Anim 2003; Gifford 2004). Rather than treat this as a dilemma that must be resolved one way or the other, is the real issue not to explore the complex ways in which continuity and rupture are combined in the production of cultural forms (see, e.g., Marshall 2006)?

Paradox abounds here. The initial key to understanding religious conversion lies in an appreciation of the cultural criteria governing it, which necessarily came first and often continue as a substrate beneath new beliefs and practices (Peel 2000, 216). At the same time, conversion, particularly to a world religion, involves the adoption of new attachments whose ramifications—moral, aesthetic, cognitive, social, organizational—are mostly unforeseen by the convert and may be quite revolutionary in local terms (as Robbins shows tellingly for the Urapmin). They depend on the convert’s being subjected to a tradition, anchored in canonical forms and enunciated by clerical authorities, that comes not merely from the past but from the past of another people in another place. So here a rupture in one cultural flow (that of the local society) depends on an effective continuity in another (that of the incoming religion). Perhaps it is easier to see this in an evangelical tradition that has been going nearly two centuries (as in West Africa) than in one of barely half a century. The emic perspective can here be historically misleading: today’s born-again may think that they are making a complete break from their past, but they are in fact continuing a tradition that runs back through the Aladura churches of the 1930s (from whom the born-again are especially anxious to differentiate themselves) and the Keswick-inspired revivals of the 1880s onwards to evangelical CMS missionaries like W. A. B. Johnson, who preached the need for rebirth in the Holy Spirit to liberated slaves in Sierra Leone in the 1820s. The continuity of such a tradition does not, however, mean the exact replication of what went before; each revival may be imagined as the reprise of an archetype—the first Day of Pentecost—but provides a form in which change may be legitimated.

Whether anthropology is exclusively wedded to the continuity assumptions of the culture concept is too big an issue to broach here. In the present context, what seems to me a

more insidious feature of anthropological analysis is that it too readily assumes that cultures are harmonious or integrated through the effect of central values, core symbols, etc. The contemporary culture of the Urapmin, having bought into evangelicalism, is conspicuously not like this, and I think this can be extended much more generally to Christian cultures and perhaps to all cultures that incorporate adherence to a world religion: they have at their heart the strain of a gap between the actual and the ideal, which makes them powerful drivers of social change.

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Robbins asks two theoretically linked questions: Why have anthropologists rendered Christian converts invisible or, at best, viewed them skeptically, and how might this be remedied? Both questions are especially timely. Given its increased worldwide popularity and multiplying local manifestations, Christianity is relevant not only to our theorization of cultural processes but to our thinking about relationships between secular and religious life.

Robbins gives us a lot to think about. For example, the selective production of anthropological knowledge and subjects (in both senses of the word) is not irreversible; women, children, and adolescents, present in all societies, were relatively late to be deemed subjects. The same can be said for other categories of persons and practices, and, as Robbins illustrates, our cultural reasons for selectivity bear serious interrogation.

Ethnographic studies of colonial evangelism, to use Beidelman’s (1982) term, have led to our understanding the connections between two powerful institutions—missionization and colonialization—that share an explicit agenda of transforming persons and the social, economic, and spiritual lives of their communities. As Robbins makes clear, the ways in which persons take up Christian beliefs and practices and communities that call themselves Christian come into being have not received systematic, comparative attention. He proposes that continuity thinking underlies the cynical anthropological stance toward Christian converts’ claims about their beliefs and reorientation to time (but see Schieffelin 2002).

Perhaps another reason that anthropologists have felt a discomfort with convert Christianity is the ways of thinking about sincerity and authenticity that are central both to Christian belief and to the creation of knowledge in our discipline. When our consultants talk with us, we hope that they will say what they mean and mean what they say, and we rely on our fieldwork and analytic skills to determine when this might not be the case. When as researchers we are confronted with linguistic and cultural practices that we do not fully understand or that appear to mirror our own, we experience doubt.

Issues of authenticity and sincerity may be intensified when we are investigating introduced Christian practices transmitted by the recently missionized who themselves are acting as missionizers. In learning new ways to view and talk about the world, they often produce transformed, syncretic, or mixed forms which may appear pidginized, partial, or superficial and unsettlingly familiar.

Anthropologists' attitudes toward the sincerity and authenticity of the practices and beliefs of their anthropological subjects are often subtly hidden in the contemporary literature, but this was not always the case. F. E. Williams's comments on Christian practices observed in Papua New Guinea reveal an attitude that he could have hidden but did not. For example, about the constant greeting and handshaking promoted by the evangelical Protestant Kwato mission and taken up by Keveri people he writes, "It seems, however, that there is something artificial and forced about such ebullitions. One often observed affectation among other Christianized natives, similar in principle to this though seldom so gross, and I do not think I am alone in being slightly repelled by it" (1944, 112). Williams not only questions the sincerity and authenticity of these productions but is explicitly negative toward what he observes—the natives acting as if they have changed.

Robbins proposes that discontinuity thinking would help us understand processes of learning as well as advance an anthropology of Christianity. The relationship between the two is mediated through language, which plays a critical role in the acquisition, construction, change, and loss of received categories—the ways in which we perceive the world. Language, central to Christianity with its emphasis on emblematic texts and defining speech and interpretive practices, articulates and constitutes a particular worldview. Conversion is a form of learning; new linguistic and cultural practices must be acquired if converts are to become known to themselves and others as Christian subjects. This is accomplished through participation in language socialization activities. What is socialized through language, however, is not predictable and involves transformation and change. Through Christian speech practices, which often involve introduced language(s), persons come to articulate themselves as different types of subjects with new desires. Language socialization, therefore, is one framework for studying how speakers encode desire in language and how that desire is articulated with different types of authority and power (Kulick and Schieffelin 2004).

An anthropology of Christianity integrating linguistic and cultural practices that takes into consideration innovation and change would be a productive context for developing models that integrate continuity and discontinuity thinking. Our view of linguistic practices and languages as relatively detachable from their original cultural moorings could influence our theories of culture. Can we imagine using concepts from language contact, shift, and change, involving syncretic, polyvalent, and heteroglossic forms at least in some domains? Conjoining linguistic and cultural practices, we should be able

to model discontinuity, transformation, and variation, all of them critical to articulating an anthropology of Christianity.

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One of the most interesting things to emerge from this paper is the notion of Christianity as a "culture," one neither more nor less well bounded than any other. Robbins offers a "Protestant-inflected ideal type" of this Christian culture. More specifically, it might be called an "evangelical/revivalistic ideal type." This type functions as a cultural overlay interacting with other types of local cultural material. Thus, while its adherents may consider themselves in communion across localities, Christianity also varies in its particular local manifestations (for example, Pentecostals among the Urapmin aren't *quite* like white suburban Pentecostals in the United States). Whether inherited from parents or acquired in other ways, Christian elements are placed in multivectorial interactions with cultural materials. These interactions constitute an ongoing engine for changes, some dramatic and others gradual.

If evangelical/revivalist Christianity is to be understood as "cultural," however, we must recognize that it carries its own notions and expectations about itself and its members. One of these is the suddenness of conversion, a notion supported by an array of related tropes and conceptions. I suggest that the most important of these is not the notion of *time* but the notion of the *person* and of what it means to be a *convert*.

These notions are conceived differently by different types of Christians. For evangelicals, conversion is a sudden psychospiritual transformation—wrought by God—that creates a "new person." Conversion is said to be a "new birth," a kind of "circumcision," or even a kind of "death" of the old self. Such notions are supported by the practice of baptism by immersion (often said to be a trope of passing from death to new life), though in the revivalist tradition the ritual of baptism merely marks an event that has already happened within. In more liturgical styles of Christianity, where baptism is done by pouring, often for infants and children, the ritual itself takes precedence and is not held to be as personally transformative. The accompanying rhetoric focuses not on the gift of a "new person" but on the outpouring of the gift of God's "grace." In such cases there is room for more gradualness in the conversion process.

Conversion stories I once collected from Thai Buddhists who had converted to Protestant Christianity reflect these differences (Zehner 2005). Most were converts to the revivalist style and sought to build their conversion stories around a particular transformative point where they had been changed for good. In these stories the acquisition of belief was partly an act of obedience and partly a gift from God. A few had become converts in Lutheran churches, however, and these

converts' stories were less likely to have dramatic climaxes, instead building up to eventual instruction for baptism.

Thus, the expectation of radical change is itself a product of the milieu into which one converts. As an empirical entity, however, conversion has both continuous and discontinuous aspects. As Robbins notes, anthropologists have tended to highlight the continuities, while Protestant Christians (at least evangelical or revivalist ones) privilege the discontinuities (the Thai Lutherans were somewhere in between).

Where there is a shared experience of sudden change, as is true of many American evangelicals and as appears to be exhibited in the Urapmin's understanding of their revival of 1977, it is not surprising that all related changes might be ascribed to a single event. However, suddenness is not necessary for changes to be profound (although sudden ones do capture our attention). As was suggested some time ago by Rita Kipp (1995), the sociological (and religious) impact of changes can be significant even when they are grounded in nondramatic, nonemotional events.

One of the reasons this is so is that most conversions to Christianity entail not just "belief" but acceptance of particular authoritative sources of teaching and templates for behavior (the background to Robbins's "belief in"). Some of these may be conveyed through particular leaders and communities, but some are also translocal in origin. Thus it is that changes at the sociocultural level can be significant even when the individual participants are uncertain about their commitments and regardless of particular conceptions of what conversion means. The "Christian culture" that is acquired through conversion is not entirely reducible to the practices and orientations of individuals.

I therefore applaud Robbins's advocacy of Christianity as cultural material worth exploring in its own right and of taking discontinuity claims seriously. That the discontinuity claims are made at all suggests the incorporation of Christian perspectives on personal and collective pasts. At the same time, we need not accept the revivalist Christian claims that these transformations are always absolute and sudden. It is still interesting to discuss the ways in which they are talked about and performed.

Reply

I thank everyone for writing such thoughtful and constructive responses. I find them quite rich in themselves, even before considering their relationships to my arguments, and I am cheered by the extent to which they can be read as talking to one another, with some responses as if they were answering questions brought up by others. Of course, many also raise critical concerns that call for a direct response on my part. In general, I see three such critical concerns that appear in several responses, and I will organize my reply around them, placing

my comments on other issues the respondents raise within the structure they provide.

Otherness and continuity. Peel and Keller both argue quite pointedly against my claim that continuity thinking motivates the traditional anthropological neglect of Christianity. For Peel, responsibility for this history of neglect should be laid squarely at the feet of the anthropological drive to study "other cultures." It is because anthropologists are committed to this, he writes, that they have "tended to neglect the religious tradition which has been the cultural cradle of their own society." On Keller's account, it is "cultural particularism" that deserves the blame for Christianity's poor showing in anthropology. Cultural particularism, a doctrine itself rooted in the disciplinary interest in difference to which Peel refers, renders anthropologists inclined to assume that when people encounter Christianity they are destined always to dissolve it without remainder in the unique solution of their traditional culture. Coleman, who does not phrase his point as a critical one per se, makes a further, quite imaginative, addition to this line of argument when he suggests that part of what makes Christianity so unsettling for anthropologists is that it directly attacks their traditional ideas about "the spatial confining of culture" by "bursting . . . the territorial boundaries of the sacred." To the extent that anthropological notions of differences are tied up with deep-seated assumptions about the territorial boundedness of cultural groups, Christianity's frequent lack of respect for territorial divisions enhances the threat it poses to the otherness anthropologists so prize.

I do not intend to argue that this line of criticism is in any sense flatly wrong. Indeed, I have elsewhere made a related claim, drawing on Harding's (1991) important piece to suggest that part of what makes Christianity so difficult follows not simply from the fact that it is too familiar to most anthropologists but also from the fact that of things that are too familiar, it is also the most strange (Robbins 2003a). As such, Christianity is, as Coleman puts it, "an anthropological anomaly" in very much the classic, Douglas-inspired sense: it belongs comfortably neither on the side of the same nor on that of the other. This anomalous status and its threat to the self/other binary that has been so important to the constitution of anthropology is one reason Christianity has continued to fare poorly even as other homogenizing, difference-attenuating components of global culture such as capitalism have managed to land themselves at the forefront of the anthropological agenda. Having made this argument, I am happy to agree that anthropology's investment in otherness has profoundly shaped its approach to Christianity.

But even as I am happy to register the importance of the argument that the disciplinary interest in difference and cultural particularity has played a part in driving anthropologists away from Christianity, I am not willing to concede that one concerning the disciplinary interest in continuity thinking is not crucial to this explaining this phenomenon as well. In the article itself I handled the relationship between the two

arguments by glossing the one based on differences as an argument about the culture of anthropology and the one based on continuity thinking as an argument about the deep structure of anthropological theory. I further suggested that the theoretical impediments to developing an anthropology of Christianity might be the most difficult ones to overcome in the long run. Even as I continue to admit that the culture/theory distinction is an awkward one, I am inclined to stick to this point.

My reluctance to jettison it is based on several observations. First, none of those who argue that the anthropological interest in difference is fundamental explain why taking this to be the case demands that we must also see continuity thinking as unimportant. Second, it is fairly obvious that for better or for worse otherness has long since started to loosen its grip on the anthropological imagination (and I am inclined, by the way, to see it as for worse [Robbins 2006]). Surely something close to a majority of anthropologists must now work in Euro-American settings that are more or less similar to those in which the discipline originated. Yet this upsurge in interest in the anthropology of the not so different has not reversed the fortunes of Christianity as an object of anthropological study as we would expect it to if the demand for otherness were the only obstacle to its study. Third and finally, I would argue that continuity thinking is in fact a fundamental, albeit often implicit, part of the architecture of anthropological understandings of otherness. Just as ideas about spatial boundedness emerged as central to those understandings of otherness in my discussion of Coleman's point above, so too do those understandings require the kinds of models of time that continuity thinking provides. My claims about continuity thinking in the article, then, can also be read as a demonstration of the impossibility of disentangling otherness and continuity thinking in anthropological thought and thus of asserting that only one of them has had a decisive role in shaping the anthropological approach to Christianity.

Shifting the argument to more empirical grounds, I also find support in Howell's response for my continued commitment to seeing continuity thinking as an important part of the story I am trying to tell about the absence of an anthropology of Christianity. Howell notes that it has generally been ethnographers of Euro-American Christian groups who have had the least trouble treating the cultures they study as Christian in significant ways. He argues that they are able to do this because the threat of discontinuity does not arise in these cases, since "Christianity is indigenous to these people even if they declare that they have . . . 'converted.'" Howell's point is neatly made, and it stands as something of a natural experiment gauging the influence of continuity thinking on anthropological approaches to culture; it turns out that where discontinuity is not an issue, anthropologists have little trouble studying Christianity as a culture like any other. This suggests that the presence of discontinuity in other cases where Christianity is present does have a decisive influence on steering anthropologists away from the subject.

Another line of evidence that bears on the claim that continuity thinking has played an important role in dampening anthropological interest in Christianity follows from Maxwell's, Cannell's, and MacCormack's observation that historians have not had the kind of trouble anthropologists have had with Christianity as an object of study. This difference can be linked to the tendency I mentioned in passing in the article for historians (like sociologists) to stress discontinuity over continuity (Bennett 1997; Patterson 2004). Where the anthropological disinclination to look discontinuity in the eye is not in force, the approach to Christianity becomes much less fraught. It is also true that historians have not traditionally shared anthropologists' determination to study otherness, and this too surely contributes to their openness to studying Christianity. But the fact that approaches to otherness and approaches to discontinuity in time appear to vary in step with one another between the disciplines indicates the depth of their imbrication and speaks to the difficulty of arguing that the anthropological interest in otherness alone underlies anthropology's neglect of Christianity.

Along with arguing that the commitment to otherness more than that to discontinuity has shaped the anthropological avoidance of Christianity, Peel, Keller, and (implicitly) Coleman further suggest that if anthropology has had trouble with discontinuity, it also should have found it hard to engage other world religions such as Islam and Buddhism that also value and/or produce discontinuity in some contexts. If, as I argue, anthropologists have less difficulty focusing on these world religions, then continuity thinking must not be as important a factor as I claim it is. This is a provocative point. One way I am inclined to answer it is to note that on my reading, which is admittedly not as thorough as that of specialists in these areas, the anthropologies of Islam and Buddhism have not much stressed discontinuity issues. I see the anthropology of Islam as less focused on conversion and millennialism than the existing ethnography of Christianity, for example. And I see some of the ways the little/great tradition divide has been handled in the anthropology of Buddhism as framing Buddhism's potentially discontinuous relations with local cultures in ways that do not prevent them from studying people as Buddhists and making comparisons across cases (see, e.g., Ames 1964; Spiro 1978; Gellner 1990). Furthermore, as Launay (2006) has recently argued for Africanist anthropology, where anthropologists do see another world religion such as Islam as a strong force for discontinuity, they are in fact likely to avoid focusing upon it. There is certainly room for more comparative work to be done looking at trends in the handling of discontinuity, time, and change in various branches of the anthropology of religion. But until we have an argument on the table that demonstrates that discontinuity has been central to work on other world religions, I do not think it is necessary to discount the force of continuity thinking in producing the absence of an anthropology of Christianity.

A final critical point directed at the prominent place I give

to continuity thinking is Keller's observation that since anthropologists working in various places have studied all manner of time concepts, discontinuous models of time should not be unfamiliar or difficult for them to handle. The literature pertaining to time concepts is a vast one, and I cannot state with complete confidence that it contains very little about strongly discontinuous models of time. I would note, though, that in my experience discussions of such models are not thick on the ground. Gell's (1992, 30–36) brilliant reanalysis of both Leach's (1961) discussion of alternating time and Barnes's (1974) critique of Leach in the name of cyclical time shows that both of these "exotic" models of time are based on the same kinds of ideas of "linear-progressive time" as more familiar Western models. Other "exotic" models are probably susceptible to similar analysis, showing that they do not confront us with the problems of discontinuity that Christian models put so much to the fore. Furthermore, following Bloch's (1977) influential work on how models of time are distributed across cultural domains, anthropologists studying time have also been able to cordon off "exotic" models of time in the parts of their accounts that deal with ritual and religion and thus have not had to examine their effects on everyday life in the way one often needs to when studying Christian concepts of discontinuous time (see Robbins 2001a). Although Keller's reminder that anthropologists have not shied away from looking at time cross-culturally remains a valuable one, for these reasons I do not think it proves that discontinuity has not in the past presented a problem for anthropologists.

Continuity, discontinuity, and the study of cultural change. A number of the responses challenge the value of my stress on discontinuity over continuity in the study of some kinds of cultural change. For Barker, "continuity and change are too broad and ambiguous as categories" to be useful. Harris argues that "surely the play of continuity and discontinuity is part of everyone's temporal experience," a point echoed by Peel and Maxwell as well. Schieffelin adds that an anthropology of Christianity should be "a productive context for developing models that integrate continuity and discontinuity thinking."

In the conclusion of the article I anticipated some objections along the lines that continuity and discontinuity are both ever-present and hence it is inappropriate to focus on discontinuity. I answered such bald criticisms there by noting that I was responding to an existing anthropological bias toward continuity and that until that bias becomes less prevalent, anthropologists will have to stress discontinuity if they want to get it on the agenda at all. I do not think, however, that the remarks on continuity and discontinuity I have just culled from the responses go in the direction of such bald criticism. Rather, I read them as taking up one of the broadest ambitions I had in writing the article, which was to push us toward formulating more precise and varied models of cultural change than we currently have, models that can comprehend discontinuity but that can also give us nontrivial

insights into how processes and projects of both continuity and discontinuity shape cultural transformation. These models would not only identify the presence of both continuous and discontinuous elements in any cultural situation but allow us to explain why specific cultural elements persist or change. They would problematize continuity as well as discontinuity, rather than treating the former as in need of no explanation (Bennett 1997; Weitzman 2005). I sketch a model designed to accomplish some of this work in the section of the article on belief. Here I want to highlight further resources for studying cultural change in these terms that come up in the course of the responses.

Luhrmann addresses the model of change I present directly and very elegantly develops a socially informed cognitive and developmentalist framework that brings some psychological realism to an argument I presented in wholly culturalist terms. Her conception of change as the socialization of interpretive frames, including those that define ontological commitments, provides useful guidelines for examining shifts in people's believe-in orientations to the world. My cultural approach to these matters becomes crucial at the point at which she writes about studying the "social architecture" of "nested frames" of interpretation. On my account, this architecture is cultural and needs to be studied in terms of the values or believe-in commitments that organize the nesting and shape the relative elaboration of the interpretive frames and other cultural elements into which people are socialized (Robbins n.d.).

Schieffelin's response also stresses the role of learning in cultural change, and her framing of Christian conversion as a matter in large part of language socialization adds another important specification of the kinds of concrete processes of change that my approach hopes to describe and explain. Her point that linguistic anthropologists possess an arsenal of models of change that differs significantly from the one cultural anthropologists possess and that they are probably better equipped to deal with issues of change is of signal importance for future work in this area. A focused discussion of the kind she suggests between linguistic anthropologists and other anthropologists who also study culture would I think do a great deal to push the discussion of cultural change to a higher level of sophistication.

Eriksen, Keller, and Zehner helpfully analyze some of their own data on change in ways that clarify my efforts. They and other respondents also offer a wide range of suggestions for ways to approach change. A number of respondents suggest new places to look either for change or for indigenous models of change. Thus Eriksen helpfully directs us to cases in which people self-consciously work to change their social arrangements. Zehner brings up the role of models of personhood in shaping change. Maxwell outlines a theory of the role of generational shifts in driving processes both of change and of (reestablished) continuity (I concur with his assessment of the importance of generations in the study of change and would suggest that Mannheim's [1952] contributions on this topic ought to be much more widely read in anthropology).

MacCormack's suggestion that we look at changes in kinds of time themselves and that we include liturgical and calendrical time among the kinds of time we study is well taken and dovetails nicely with Cannell's and Howell's attention to the role of eternity and the transcendent as further aspects of Christian temporality. Finally, the arguments from Cannell, Harris, and Zehner that we need to attend to different models of conversion indicate that opening ourselves up on this score would, like looking at various models of time, have a salutary effect on our ability to reckon with change. In addition, it would help sensitize us to the ways people adapt Christian models of conversion to help them construe changes in cultural domains beyond the religious, as Sharp (2006, 113) has shown is the case for organ transplant recipients in the United States.

Cannell perfectly states a wider point of great importance when she writes that we need to open up our investigations of "how cultures receiving particular Christianities think about change (or not) not only *through* Christianity but also in ways not solely attributable to it." I have focused on Christianity's role in this article because it is intended as a contribution to the emerging anthropology of that world religion. But in studying issues of continuity and discontinuity more generally, it is clear that what is necessary is what Cannell labels a broader "ethnography of change" which we can then draw on to sharpen our theoretical approaches to the topic.

Several of the responses make it clear that in the development of such theoretical approaches, one issue that will need to be dealt with is the one Peel refers to as "the emic/etic problem" (see also Eriksen, Harris, and Zehner). Put most simply, the problem looks like this. People, and Christians in particular, may strongly espouse what Eriksen nicely calls an "ideology" of "radical change" and insist that they and others in their society have put this ideology into action and transformed their culture. As prominent as such emic accounts may be in any given culture, from the point of view of anthropological analysis the presence of them is not sufficient to demonstrate that change has actually occurred. Indeed, as in the modern (Christian) West (see Cannell), such ideologies of change can be an enduring, "continuous" feature of some cultures.

The emic/etic problem is real, but as Eriksen reminds us it is not at all insoluble. Minimally, we need to distinguish between cases in which ideologies of change are enduring and those in which they are themselves new and hence constitute elements of cultural change themselves. Beyond this, it is important to explore how the actions people have taken in light of these ideologies have changed or not changed other aspects of their cultures. Part of my motivation in writing this article is my sense that too often anthropologists faced with Christian cultures have not taken these steps but have instead adopted an etic view that disregards people's claims to have changed. Harris puts my response to this better than I have been able to when she writes, "We should not discount people's own commitment to a temporal organization of rup-

ture." Keeping the emic and etic in dialogue has always been the highest-risk/highest-reward anthropological technique; in the anthropology of Christianity, etic suspicions about the possibility of achieving discontinuity too often crowd out emic proclamations to have accomplished just that. Even to get started in studying the role of Christianity in cultural change productively, anthropologists need to critically examine those etic suspicions.

Cases and comparisons. A number of the respondents see my work among the Urapmin looming large behind what I have here presented as a theoretical argument of wide applicability rather than as an analysis of a single ethnographic case. Peel again puts the matter most directly, suggesting that I have offered "a general theoretical case made largely on the basis of one ethnographic instance." But Maxwell puts his generational approach to change to similar use in tying my interest in discontinuity to the interest first-generation converts like the Urapmin tend to show in rupture. And Coleman contextualizes my discussion of the Comaroffs' work by relating it to the differences in "temporal and social scale" between the Tswana and Urapmin cases. Both Maxwell and Coleman have helped me gain some useful perspective on my work, and Peel's more critical point is worth raising. Anthropologists always struggle with the relation between the cases to which they devote so much time and the theories that need to be independent of those cases to travel well, and asking about their success in this struggle is always fair. Having noted that, however, I would go on to add that my experience of coming to the ideas presented in this paper has been somewhat different from what these comments would lead one to expect.

My interest in discontinuity as a topic of study and in anthropological problems with discontinuity as an important cause of the discipline's neglect of Christianity came not so much out of my Urapmin research as out of several years spent reading very intensively and widely in the literature on global Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity (Robbins 2003*b*, 2004*b*). In reading that literature, I noticed that scholars writing about very different places repeatedly found that converts to these kinds of Christianity stressed the discontinuity that marked their conversions and understood the differences between their new beliefs and their old ones to be stark. (Peel would presumably find this plausible, since shortly after suggesting I argue from one case he goes on to add that the case in question "can be readily paralleled elsewhere in the neo-Pentecostal movement that has flourished round the world since the 1970s.") One could say I was primed to find this emphasis on discontinuity in the global literature by my work among the Urapmin, and such idiosyncratic priming may well be one of the strengths of the anthropological habit of putting intensive, open-ended fieldwork before theory-building efforts on its normative career path. But it remains true that I was not able sharply to conceptualize the force of discontinuity models in Urapmin life until I had encountered them in other readings that set the Urapmin experience in

relation to that of other converts to Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity. The value such comparative work has had in my own intellectual development is a key source of my insistence that we should fashion a comparative anthropology of Christianity and not be satisfied simply to accumulate ethnographies of Christian peoples.

Even if laying my interest in discontinuity solely at the feet of my Urapmin research does not seem quite right to me, I want to mention one of the ways in which the experience of that research has motivated my contributions toward the development of an anthropology of Christianity. Although the Pacific region is statistically the most Christian one on earth, I received no training pertaining to Christianity. Like Barker, I was warned to give Christianity a wide berth if possible, and no one suggested I look at all into its history, various divisions, etc. In saying this I do not want to single out my own graduate training as problematic. Until very recently, researchers going to most places in the world where Christianity is present were rarely encouraged to prepare for their potential encounter with it. This was the pedagogical side of the active production of neglect I discuss in the article. In my case, one result of this lack of training was that it took me over a year of work after my return from the field to figure out where precisely the Urapmin fit in the variegated map of world Christianity. And it was only once I figured this out that I was able to begin the comparative reading in the literature on Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity that I mentioned above. One of my hopes for the emerging anthropology of Christianity is that it will save people such trouble in the future and allow them to do more informed research from the outset.

Final thoughts. Garma's suggestion that an anthropology of Christianity focused in important respects on belief will have to contend with "unbelief" as well is perhaps the most unexpected moment in these responses. It ingeniously pushes my discussion of belief in new directions and can serve at the end here to bring us back to questions of the specificity of Christian cultures. Christianity is marked not only by its insistence on believe-in constructions of faith but also by its requirement that the faithful also disbelieve-in things such as idols, false prophets, and all manner of non-Christian spirits. As the theologian Morse (1994) has argued, "faithful disbelief" is a constitutive element of the Christian life. Garma is right to see such disbelief as important to the arguments of this article, for it is this requirement to disbelieve-in (distrust) traditional spiritual powers that sparks many important processes of discontinuity. Furthermore, the Mexican Pentecostal habit of stressing the meaningless, unbelievable qualities of Christian denominations they have left behind for Pentecostal ones that he mentions is common among converts elsewhere as well (Gershon 2006), and it reminds us of the prevalence of discontinuity thinking internally in the Christian tradition. Garma's reminder of the importance of unbelief in Christianity also directs us to the peculiar stakes for which Christianity tends to play the game of guiding people's views of

the world. By positing the meaningless, unbelievable qualities of the traditions and customs from which it breaks, Christianity retains meaninglessness and uncontrolled unbelief as major threats to its status in people's lives (Engelke and Tomlinson 2006). Anthropologists of Christianity will thus have to be attuned to the tendency it has shown to school its adherents in doubt and to produce secularity—to be, as Gauchet (1997, 4) has it, "a religion for departing from religion" (emphasis removed) (see also Smith 1988).

In 1992 Barker (1992, 155) made a signal contribution to the study of Christianity in Melanesia and elsewhere when he asserted that "in the final analysis, the focus on the missionary encounter must be questioned because it is archaic." This was a clarion call to those of us who wanted to study Melanesians as Christians who lived Christianity as their own religion in the present. To be sure, it is important to know how Christianity historically entered any given cultural setting, but in dwelling so often on the mission encounter we were in danger of making the past the whole story and thereby once again making Christianity as a lived culture in its own right disappear. Given the quality of the responses I have just discussed and the extent to which they can be read as speaking not only to the original article but also to one another, I am inclined to suggest that Barker has once again formulated a most timely message when he writes that as far as the anthropological study of Christianity is concerned, "it may be time to move past the critiques of those who neglect the subject and focus more on the innovative work being done by others." I look forward to taking that path in the company of Barker, his fellow respondents, and other anthropologists who are contributing to the development of the anthropology of Christianity.

—Joel Robbins

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