Christianity, Anthropology, Politics

by Ruth Marshall

In this article I engage with the conceptual difficulties that studying Christianity poses for anthropology, revisiting and expanding on the critical moves made in the development of the subfield, especially in debates among Robbins, Haynes, Cannell, Garriott, and O'Neill. In particular, I consider the theoretical challenges and the political implications involved in elaborating an adequate concept of Christianity or the Christian. I argue that studying Christianity as a "tradition" implicates the anthropologist in much more than the study of "a religion," and while Asad's approach to the study of Islam is methodologically sound, applying it to the case of Christianity involves specific challenges. I use my reading of these methodological and conceptual challenges to critically consider the ways in which anthropology engages with alterity as an epistemological or ethical ground and the political implications of this engagement. Finally, I offer some methodological insights drawn from my study of Pentecostal Christianity that might assist the researcher in studying these specific forms of Christian practice today.

What are the future prospects for an anthropology of Christianity, and more specifically, of charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity? Extremely important work has been done in positioning the anthropological study of Christianity in a critical relationship to anthropology more generally as well as creating a forum in which comparative work could be undertaken and reflection shared on specific analytical and methodological questions. I welcome the opportunity to participate in critical reflection on the past and future of this growing subfield some 10 years after the first debates brought the anthropological study of Christianity into critical relief.[1]

The anthropological attention to Pentecostalism as a specific iteration of Christianity has been an extremely fruitful entry point for anthropologists to engage critically with their discipline's approach to the study of Christianity or lack thereof as well as with its broader epistemological assumptions. If Christianity generally and Pentecostalism specifically pose unique challenges to scholarly reflexivity, the difficulties an anthropologist faces in constructing it as an object of study are not identical to those of the political scientist or the political theorist, nor are they those of the Pentecostal or charismatic theologian, also specialists who reflect on their practice. From my perspective as a scholar for whom political questions take precedence over cultural ones, Pentecostalism was an exciting object of research because of its revolutionary, evangelical, and decidedly political claims. I am thus particularly interested in critically exploring the questions that mo-

tivate anthropologists to select an object of research and the methodological and analytical principles that guide the exploration of it.

In this paper, I want to take up the central issues that have arisen from the self-reflexive critique that anthropologists of Christianity have already begun (Bialecki 2010, 2012; Bialecki, Haynes, and Robbins 2008; Cannell 2005, 2006; Coleman 2000, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2012; Daswani 2012; Engelke 2010*a*, 2010*b*; Engelke and Robbins 2010; Garriott and O'Neill 2008; Klassen 2011; Meyer 2006, 2010; O'Neill 2009; Robbins 2003*a*, 2003*b*, 2004*a*, 2004*b*, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010). One of the ongoing challenges for the anthropology of Christianity might be to recognize the effect that the dominance of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity has had on the development of the field (Bandak 2014; Hann 2014; Humphrey 2014; Mayblin 2014). However, this paper does not have the scope to engage with the great range of contemporary ethnographies of Christianity (see Bandak 2014; Hann 2007, 2014; Hoskins 2014; Humphrey 2014; Mayblin 2014). Rather, I will revisit the early exchanges in the subfield, focused largely on Pentecostalism, with a view to presenting some critical perspectives on the challenges that the study of Christianity poses to the discipline of anthropology more generally. Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity may be a particularly polemical example of the

Ruth Marshall is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto (Jackman Humanities Building, Floor 3, 170 St. George Street, Toronto, Ontario M5R 2M8, Canada [ruth .marshall@utoronto.ca]).

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1. I enter the debate on the anthropology of Christianity as a political scientist, yet as one whose central interlocutors have largely been anthropologists, postcolonial theorists, and political philosophers. Empirical political scientists, on the rare occasions they have paid these forms of Christianity any mind, have largely proceeded on the bases of analyses that take for granted the very divisions between the religious and the political as well as understandings of agency, power, and the subject that Pentecostal practices appear to defy. The great merit of the relatively new field of anthropology of Christianity is that it has been considerably more self-reflexive in its approach.

difficulties and political stakes involved in thinking anthropologically about the Christian tradition and its multifarious iterations—in particular, through its antagonistic relations to local cultures and traditions and its political illiberalism—but it is not unique. From the perspective of my argument, its differences as a Christian project are a question of degree rather than kind. In a decisive sense, Christianity is not merely a religion and cannot be studied without an acute awareness of what its "tradition" entails politically. I am thus especially concerned to show that the methodological and analytical challenges that Christianity poses to anthropology's epistemological assumptions and ethical stances are profoundly political and need to be recognized as such.

Who and What Is a Christian? On the Problems of an Adequate Concept

What we have come to confront, however, by way of the grammar of the concept of religion, is that Christianity has yet to be recognized as a concept and to become the explicit object of such anthropological inquiry. Gil Anidjar (2009: 388)

Christianity or the Christian is the very thing—the thing itself—*that has to be thought.* Jean-Luc Nancy (2008:140)

Perhaps the most vexed aspect of the project of an anthropology of Christianity has been the difficulty of developing a concept adequate for comparative inquiry that at once respects diversity but provides grounds for grouping together an extremely diverse collection of discourses and practices. As Anidjar argues, citing and "Christianizing" Asad's text on the anthropology of Islam (a text that has also informed debates within the field of the anthropology of Christianity), "the issue goes beyond being for or against the attempt to generalize about Christianity. It is rather set 'against the manner in which the generalization is undertaken. Anyone working on the anthropology of [Christianity] will be aware that there is considerable diversity in the beliefs and practices of [Christians]. The first problem is therefore one of organizing this diversity in terms of an adequate concept'" (Anidjar 2009: 389, citing Asad 1986:4).

Divergent concepts of Christianity are deployed today in a wide variety of discursive strategies, such as those of anthropologists or political theorists and Christians themselves. The agonistic nature of the ways in which these deployments interact illustrates what Gil Anidjar means when he says for Talal Asad, religion is a polemical concept: "the concept of religion is *performative.* . . . Each time it is used or invoked, it enables understanding, provides orientation, allocates meaning; it gathers, defines, sustains and even dictates dispositions, practices and modes of behaviour" (Anidjar 2009: 368). In their respective discussions of "what" and "who" is a Christian, Robbins, Cannell, Garriott, and O'Neill engage

with the conceptual model Asad deploys for an "anthropology of Islam," where he argues, "If one wants to write an anthropology of Islam one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qu'ran and Hadith. Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artifacts, customs, and morals. It is a tradition" (Asad 1986:14). They are careful to note that for Asad, this does not mean measuring practices against some sort of ideal/typical "essential" Islam but rather "the way something understandable as 'Islam' emerges through debates among Muslims (and their interlocutors) over the appropriateness of particular practices and beliefs. In this regard, the debate over the tradition *is* the tradition for Asad" (Garriott and O'Neill 2008:388). Asad's point, inspired by Foucault, is that concepts do not so much represent a field of practice as constitute an *intervention* into it. In this sense, all concepts can be understood, at least minimally, as prescriptive. Another way of putting this is that there are no "objects" as such—Christianity, Islam, the state, religion—but only *objectifications* understood in purely relational and contingent terms insofar as they emerge from within a mobile field of relations of power and knowledge (Marshall 2009:6, 36). As Anidjar (2009) points out, concepts are also always comparative, not only because they can be deployed over vast and varied fields of practice but also because a concept "*itself* designates a specific distribution of power, an 'order(ing) of things'" with its own "internal divisions according to which it functions," and which it enacts and embodies (369–370).

Asad's interest in the genealogy of conceptualizations and his acute attention to the effects of their deployments in different times and places makes him a kindred spirit to many critical political theorists. From my own Foucauldian perspective, I approached Pentecostalism as a form of strategic program, examining the ways it functioned as a prescriptive regime in postcolonial Nigeria. Specifically, because the Pentecostal revival presented itself as a politically unorthodox form of insurrection claiming to effect a radical break with the past and bring about a new creation, both individual and collective, it required an approach that enabled me to take this project at its word, attempting to understand nonreductively how it constituted itself as a force. This required rejecting preconceived ideas of the proper relation between the religious and the political or of the meaning of terms such as "agency," "rationality," or "the subject." If I can put it in these terms, the inquiry privileged questions of "how" before questions of "what" or "who."

So for those concerned with getting the taxonomy right—are they charismatic? Pentecostal? neo-Pentecostal?—it is important to remember that for Pentecostals and charismatics, the insistence that they are simply "Christians" is not always meant as a gesture of ecumenism. It can just as often imply a polemical, indeed apocalyptic claim of the order of "we and only we are Christians who know and enact the Truth," or we, as Christians, are the only true vanguard against the "en-

emy," the only force holding back the Antichrist. In their accounts of the world and history, Pentecostals challenge the orderings of historians, anthropologists, political scientists, even other Christians, and anthropological or social scientific explanations can also be the object of explicit protest by charismatics and evangelicals. In my book I cited the South African Zionist who wrote with great impatience about the history of South Africa as written by outsiders: "There is one enormous omission throughout the whole history that has been written by outsiders. The work of the Holy Spirit throughout our history has simply been left out. The events of our history have been recorded as if everything could be accounted for simply by sociology and anthropology. We would like to write our own history from the point of view of the Holy Spirit" (Ngada 1985:21). In these senses and others, Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity engages in an explicitly polemical intervention into the field not only of local practices but also through the elaboration of a world-historical mission of the meaning of history and of the world itself. One of the ways in which Pentecostalism defines itself is precisely through staging the problem of the proper concept publicly, debating and even polemicizing about the question, "who is born-again?"

The problem of the adequate concept is more radical than that of simply "recognizing" that the discipline has ignored Christianity, accounting for the reasons of this neglect, and "getting over them" and "getting on with it" by assembling a group of scholars now determined to make Christianity their object (Garriott and O'Neill 2008; Robbins 2003*b*, 2007). Joel Robbins and his interlocutors such as O'Neill, Cannell, and Klassen have engaged with this problem in a series of publications that have in different ways foregrounded the critical recognition that both anthropologists *and* their subjects of study deploy concepts of religion, Christianity, and Pentecostalism in a polemical fashion. O'Neill and Garriott take up the apparent antagonism between Christian and anthropological modes of understanding in a rich intervention in which they ask whether "incommensurability between Christian and anthropological sense-making practices" is a necessary outcome (Garriott and O'Neill 2008:386). They (Garriott and O'Neill 2008) argue for a dialogic approach (following Bakhtin) that makes the different ways that Christianity is a problem both for anthropologists and Christians "a matter of analytic and ethnographic investigation" and hence not simply a question "of internal disciplinary critique" (384). I see this as a fruitful move, and yet I caution that focusing on how Christianity is a polemical object for Christians may not necessarily fully resolve some the ways in which Christianity does pose a problem to the discipline or address the full political implications of the important problems that Robbins raises.

Robbins notes the peculiar difficulties that anthropologists have in taking Pentecostals "on their own terms"—a methodological principle that is central to anthropology—while maintaining an anthropological commitment to respect for alterity. He explains this difficulty in terms of a general and

for him a decisive issue, namely, the manner in which Christians "almost wherever they are, appear at once too similar to anthropologists to be worthy of study and too meaningfully different to be easily made sense of by the use of standard anthropological tools" (Robbins 2003*b*:192). On the point of difference, Robbins cites Susan Harding (1991, 2000), who argues that American "fundamentalists" are threatening or repugnant cultural others because "they challenge liberal versions of modernity of the kind most anthropologists subscribe to" in a way that more "classic" sorts of anthropological objects, such as the traditional religion of the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, do not (Robbins 2003*b*:193). Clearly Robbins thinks that being challenged on one's own terms is a salutary thing but that it nonetheless may come into conflict with the anthropologist's sense-making practices as well as his own values or the ethics of the discipline, which is to say the recognition and respect for difference or alterity. Robbins is not saying that Urapmin traditional religion is easier to understand for the anthropologist than Urapmin Pentecostalism. However, the point is surely not that the Urapmin might not have, from a liberal's perspective, politically or culturally repugnant ideas about epistemology or the relations between people and groups. The point is rather that they do not seek to *impose* these ideas on the liberal anthropologist—they do not "take a position" on the anthropologist's own views of the world and the ways he makes sense of theirs—or at least if they do, they do not do so in such a way as to put the anthropological project (which we must read as part of a hegemonic Western epistemology) in jeopardy. Pentecostals most certainly do take a position with regard to the ways in which anthropologists conceive the world as well as the anthropological project's claims of understanding.

The Problem of Alterity and the Repugnant Christian Other

Robbins (2003*b*) argues, extending Harding's observations, that rather than difference, "it is the closeness of Christianity that makes its otherness so potent: repugnance in this case can be explained in classic anthropological terms as a response to an anomalous mixture of the similar and the different" (193, referring to Douglas 1966). This formulation is revelatory of the difficulties anthropologists have with ways in which evangelical Christians "make anthropologists recoil by unsettling the fundamental schemes by which the discipline organizes the world into the familiar and the foreign" (Robbins 2003*b*:193). One of the things Robbins perhaps means is that until recently, social and cultural anthropology has largely been a matter not simply of studying culture but of studying *different* cultures and societies. Hence, Pentecostals, even when they are found in cultures other than the anthropologists', are still too "familiar" for them to be allocated to the "foreign." To put it in my terms, what makes them repugnant is not their cultural difference but their political

difference. Pentecostalism emerges from within a Western Christian tradition while being seen as epitomizing the sorts of Western political illiberalism and evangelical, conversionist cultural superiority that anthropologists struggle against. The central issue I take Robbins to be flagging here, even if he does not fully expand on it, is the problematic way in which anthropology has made this distinction on the grounds of cultural alterity fundamental. In fact, as I will try to show below, this distinction is inherently unstable and not without risk insofar as there is no way of studying difference as such: there are only different configurations of difference realized through different modes of differentiation. In other words, people and their worldviews are always composed of various and diverse elements; how these elements parse out in terms of difference in any given case is a question of how concepts function as processes of differentiation, processes that are always embedded in relations of power.

Concepts are always already comparative, always already designating an order of things, of lines of inclusion and exclusion, such as the foreign and familiar, the same and the other, the Christian and the anthropologist. Yet even if in the final instance, conceptualization refuses any essential ground for this designation, even if it admits the contingency of all grounds for differentiation, it nonetheless puts into play such a ground. As Robbins makes clear, much social and cultural anthropology (though not all) puts into play a concept of alterity as its (more or less) contingent epistemological ground, which finds its political or ethical expression in the valorization of alterity and the respect for cultural difference (Bender and Klassen 2010). In Viveiros de Castro's words, anthropology is a form of cogitation that "assumes the virtual presence of Another as its condition, indeed, its precondition" (Viveiros de Castro 2003:8). But what are the implications of this privileging of alterity in capital letters, particularly when its expression is understood in terms of *culture*? How are we to recognize this other as Another, and not simply any old other, or, indeed, the same? If something called culture or worldview is to do the work of grounding difference such that the discipline's ordering principles would not be unsettled, this can only occur in a stable fashion if this something is ontologized. Viveiros de Castro has no problem with this and wants to reclaim the "language of ontology" for anthropology.[2] As Matei Candea puts it, the justification for the use

of ontology is seen as a response to the ways in which culture has become "devalued" as a marker of difference under conditions of globalization; ontological language could be metaphorically understood as a return to "a gold standard" (Candea et al. 2010:175). Fortunately, Robbins, along with most anthropologists, would absolutely refuse this ontologization of culture, even for Viveiros de Castro's "strategic reasons." Indeed, Robbins reminds us of anthropologists' "suspicion of comparative projects more generally" because of the fear of essentializing (Robbins 2003*b*:193).

This fear of essentialism is testimony to the fact that while there is an acute recognition of the ways in which positing alterity poses an epistemological (as well as an ethico-political) problem for anthropologists, there is also some desperation in the face of the difficulty of resolving it. In other words, the ethical imperative of respect for the other in her otherness is absolutely correct, but its practice in anthropological writing is much more fraught—Viveiros de Castro is right on that point. Needless to say, I do not think using the language of ontology as a means of grounding cultural difference, even strategically, is the way out—we know where that can lead politically. To say it even more plainly, what is most pernicious about the ontologization of culture is that the construction of lines of inclusion and exclusion in a given group or people or culture or collectivity by the anthropologist is an apolitical process. The anthropologist must describe or represent these lines as if they had some sort of reality, consistency, and endurance (being as enduring substance beyond the purely ontic is what the word "ontology" means) rather than as shifting divisions that are formed by the play of ongoing, contingent, and politically charged processes of differentiation among which are anthropological representations. No amount of self-reflexivity will resolve this problem (see, e.g., Vilaça 2014).

While the limits of reflexivity and cultural translation pose a problem for anthropology in general, not all anthropologists want to claim that their discipline is a "political science in the fullest sense." Yet the ontological move paradoxically betrays the very political commitment to respecting and supporting Another's cultural and political integrity that lies behind anthropology as "the science of the ontological self-determination of the world's peoples." If the ground of the "ontological self-determination of the world's peoples" is cultural, then some sort of cultural criteriology is required in order for difference to be recognized or represented (both by the peoples concerned and the anthropological observer). The process of accounting for native practices entails an episte-

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2. In his words, "The image of Being is obviously a dangerous analogic soil for thinking about non-western conceptual imaginations, and the notion of ontology is not without its own risks. . . . Nonetheless, I think the language of ontology is important for one specific and, let's say, tactical reason. It acts as a counter-measure to a derealizing trick frequently played against the native's thinking, which turns this thought into a kind of sustained phantasy, by reducing it to the dimensions of a form of knowledge or representation, that is to an 'epistemology' or a 'worldview'. . . . I shall conclude by once more claiming that anthropology is the science of the ontological self-determination of the world's peoples, and that it is thus a political science in the fullest sense" (Viveiros de Castro 2003:18). The first obvious objection is that all epistemologies are "sustained phantasies" of a sort, and ontologizing certainly will not re-

solve the problem of our access to the Real (see Lacan). With regard to its "strategic" deployment, Viveiros de Castro is not saying anything new here; Gayatri Spivak (1987) proposed the idea of a strategic essentialism in 1987, endorsing a "strategic use of essentialism" only "in a scrupulously visible political interest" (205) but later drew attention to the very real dangers of it becoming a master word or a mobilizing slogan, saying, "I have given up using it" (Spivak, Danius, and Jonsson 1993:36). Viveiros de Castro displays considerably less reserve.

mological stance that depends on the fantasy of standing outside culture or the social, a fantasy that thus enables the a priori positing of cultural difference—"the virtual presence of Another as its precondition"—a metaphysical, ontotheological image if there ever was one (Viveiros de Castro 2003: 18). If anthropology wants to recognize itself as a fundamentally political discourse concerned with the self-determination of peoples, then the only politically viable form of ground, principle, or axiom is the a priori positing of equality, not difference. Moreover, even if it aims to let the peoples speak for themselves, the ontological turn cannot help reiterating the epistemological privilege anthropology is accorded and accords itself in representing and translating other ways of life. Some of these critiques are not specific to the ontologizers, who at least wear their essentializing on their sleeves. How much violence has been done in the name of liberal values of nonessentialism, tolerance, and respect for the other? As adapted by anthropology, the liberal project perpetuates the illusion of political and ethical neutrality in ethnographic representation and anthropological interpretation as long as a rigorous and heartfelt ethico-epistemological examination of one's own subject position is undertaken.[3]

Even if we argue, as many anthropologists do today, that one can no longer use alterity as an epistemological ground for understanding culture, adopting alterity as a fundamental principle guiding anthropology's ethical stance to its objects still faces similar difficulties. The problem with an ethics of alterity is that in the absence of a guarantor of the relation between the other and the same, which is to say the Absolute Other, there is no way of securely grounding the otherness of the other. It might be objected that anthropologists do not use God or any other metaphysical principle to ground what they mean by alterity. However, when they refuse such principles yet nonetheless put alterity into play in either their epistemological or ethical stances, this alterity can then only be grounded by the anthropologist's *positing* it and *witnessing* to it.

In his *Ethics*, political philosopher Alain Badiou takes on the liberal ethical discourse around the broadly Lévinasian thematics of the "respect for the other." Contrary to the gross misrepresentation in some postcolonial literature (Gandhi 2011) of Badiou as a sort of crypto-fascist who would deny all respect for difference, Nicholas Brown makes it clear that "Badiou himself has the greatest respect for Lévinas, and in fact offers no direct critique of Lévinas's ethics. He merely demonstrates what Lévinas would never deny, which is that there is nothing that guarantees the essential otherness of the other (whose relation to me or to a third might always bring us under the category of the Same) except the existence of an Altogether Other who shines through the appearance of the other. The foundation of an ethics of alterity, in other

words, can only be an ineffable God; it cannot be secularized without losing this support" (Brown 2004:297–298). For Badiou, while there is nothing inconsistent about Lévinasian ethics, what it demonstrates is that such an ethics "is a category of pious discourse" (Badiou 2001:23). In its secularized version, otherness can only be posited, which implies that "the ineffable other is a product of my own thought and therefore not other at all" (Brown 2004:298). In adopting a secularized version of this ethics of alterity, anthropology perpetually runs the risk of bringing the other into the category of the same and can do nothing definitive to guard against this risk. Anthropologists are acutely aware of this problem and constantly seek to critically come to terms with it. In raising these questions, anthropology of Christianity thus brings attention to an issue of broader interest to the discipline and prompts us to ask, why this will to cultural otherness?

Robbins, Bialecki, and Haynes highlight the "perils of continuity thinking" in the study of Pentecostalism to draw our attention to the tendency of anthropologists to explain, or indeed, explain away as long-standing local cultural practices what are in fact broadly shared attributes of Pentecostalism everywhere it is found (Bielecki, Haynes, and 2008:1141; Robbins 2007; see also Daswani 2012). I take this to be a symptom of this will to otherness. We could call this process the practice of vernacularization, by which I do not mean the ways the novel may become integrated into a given local life world but rather the ways in which anthropologists actively domesticate the novel by translating it into the cultural language they consider to be idiomatic for the people in question (Marshall 2009; Tonda 2002). Aside from the broader question of anthropology's ongoing, though still largely disavowed, relations with Christian witness, another reason this will takes a testimonial form is methodological. Despite extensive debates on this question, anthropology is still largely a "you had to be there" sort of discipline (Bamford and Robbins 1997; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Comaroff and Comaroff 2003; Ferguson and Gupta 1997). "Being there" implies that there is a place one could be, observe, participate in, and experience for oneself and secondhand the experiences of others.

Indeed, Robbins puts experience at the very heart of the project of understanding Pentecostalism, as Pentecostals also do: "to claim, as anthropologists must, that Christians make sense in their own terms is at least to admit that it is possible to argue in a reasonable way that anthropologists do not make sense in their own. Anyone who has been told in the course of fieldwork that to understand is to convert has a visceral sense of the force of such Christian challenges to the modernist tradition" (Robbins 2003*b*:193). The force of this arises less from the drama of the impossibility of fully understanding Pentecostalism without converting than the way it ruptures the eminently modernist fantasy of understanding the thing itself through the exercise of an individual consciousness. We can never have full access to any thing itself, be it a different culture, another person, any other way of being, however

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3. At times, this exercise of self-examination entails a shocking display of political self-righteousness, hypocrisy, and overwrought self-involvement—as in Pandian (2012).

much we attempt to "bracket" our own experience of the world.

But is experience of the world—ours, theirs—primarily what is at stake in understanding for anthropologists? Given that Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity presents itself as an experiential, embodied, and ecstatic faith—as opposed to, say, a faith enacted primarily through intellectual reflection, appeals to historical tradition, or liturgical participation (see Bandak 2014; Barker 2014; Coleman 2014; Handman 2014; Hann 2014; Humphrey 2014)—there is perhaps an increased temptation to think that the only way to understand it is to experience it, or failing that, that the best access we can have to it is accounts of converts' experiences of it (Knibbe and Versteeg 2008). While such experiences should not of course be discounted, it is not clear to me why they should be privileged. Other recent work in the anthropology of Christianity shows the evidential significance of institutional and discursive forms, which cannot simply be accessed through participant observation or participants' accounts of themselves (Barker 2014; Handman 2014; Hann 2014; Humphrey 2014). What interested me in converts' accounts was as much their form as their content insofar as their accounts were forms of Christian witness, which is to say a discursive genre that disciplined the subject to understand and recount her experience in a particular way. For me the main challenge was to inquire into the ways and means by which becoming Pentecostal brought the subject to a new experience of the world, an approach that does not require accessing an individual consciousness of this experience. More specifically, I sought to inquire into the mechanisms that were in play such that she was compelled to give *this* account of herself in *this* particular manner and the means of compulsion (Butler 2005).

Robbins gives us a hint of one way this will to otherness intervenes in evaluations of the "proper" anthropological object when he cites Harding as she argues that Christian fundamentalists in particular are "repugnant cultural other[s] who, unlike those whose differences are constituted along lines of race/sex/class/ethnicity/colonialism, are not suitable subjects of anthropological attention" (Harding 1991:375). Let me rephrase this last sentence; Christians are unlike those who are or have been constituted by a racist, patriarchal, dominating, essentializing, universalizing, imperial, Christian power as both different and subaltern and as one through the other. Why are they not suitable? Because they are not the right sort of subaltern or the right sort of other.

Thus, behind Robbins's discussion of closeness and otherness is a larger issue, one that has to do with what Cannell has rightly identified as the Christianity of anthropology (Cannell 2005: esp. 340). Pamela Klassen (2011) takes on Cannell when she argues that it is not enough to charge anthropology for assuming Christianity to mean a largely Protestant and post-Enlightenment version of it, as Cannell does, or to focus on Christianity's functions as a motor of secularization. Rather, following Klassen's arguments in her

book *Spirits of Protestantism*, we need to consider more carefully the ways in which Christianity is partially constitutive of the discipline of anthropology per se and of the anthropology of Christianity in particular. Klassen argues that anthropology seems to be facing a political "lack of nerve" and "crisis of faith" (2011:xxi), a crisis connected to the discipline's more or less agonistic complicities with mission Christianity, colonialism, and colonial science. It is this history, the senses in which anthropologists understand it to be behind them, and the ways in which they struggle to keep it behind them that compel them to witness to the integrity of those cultural forms that colonial power set out to Christianize and "civilize." While this impulse is not at issue, it does not dispense us from ongoing attention to how this rather salvific or redemptive ethos plays itself out in anthropological practice. My open question is whether, in struggling against old modes of dominating, essentializing, and sublating difference, a grounding assumption of political equality is not better than a grounding assumption of cultural alterity.

We thus also need to ask whether the secularized, multiculturalist version of this ethics of alterity really entails the complete respect for this ethics that it claims to. And if so, why are Pentecostals still considered by many liberals, including some anthropologists, to be "repugnant others"? In fact, Badiou claims that the only real difference this ethic respects is difference as such: "In its everyday form, without the support of the Altogether Other, the ethics of difference bifurcates as soon as it is put into play. Its attitude towards any rigorously sustained difference is entirely different from the attitude it believes itself to have towards difference as such. A rigorously sustained religious difference? Fundamentalism. Rigorously sustained political difference? Extremism. Rigorously sustained cultural difference? Barbarism" (Brown 2004: 298). As a matter of fact, "this celebrated 'other' is acceptable only if he is a *good* other—which is to say what, exactly, if not *the same as us?*" (Badiou 2001:24). This means that the discourse of the other is effectively a discourse of the Same, "a cosmopolitan fantasy of liberal-democratic, free-market society: nothing other than the identity of a wealthy—albeit visibly declining—'West'" (Badiou 2001:24; in Brown 2004: 298).

Anthropologists' forms of witness can constitute a vanguard against this ethic's failure. Nonetheless, the ethical and political quandary of respecting difference without falling into these traps remains. I should also point out here that this quandary is by no means a specifically anthropological problem. With regard to the ways in which it constructs religion and culture as the repugnant *political* other through its association of religion, violence, and culture, liberal political science is no doubt a worse offender. And yet, I find the logic of Badiou's critique implacable. You cannot reverse the logic of the binary simply by asserting the subaltern term; you can only begin to deconstruct it. All the anthropologist can do then is attend to the ways in which their ethics might bifurcate as they are put into play and struggle against this. This is by

no means an easy task, because the risk is not only that otherness may be understood in terms of the same but also that otherness may become unrecognizable altogether—either too radically other to be approached at all or on the other hand collapsed into a mere fantasy; in either case, this puts the democratic ethos of this ethics in question. The argument that culture has ceased to work as the "gold standard" for marking difference is symptomatic of this confusion. Above all it reminds us that the grounds of alterity must always be held to be contingent, which implies for anthropologists that culture by definition is inessential, emergent, open to change, to the new, which is also to say that it is vulnerable. I take this to be the critical thrust of Robbins's problematization even if he perhaps would not put it in these terms.

On a Concept of a Christian Tradition

Once again, Klassen's exciting work brings to my mind what I take to be the crux of the problem of the adequate concept of a Christian tradition even if I have no way of resolving this problem here. In other words, the central problem not explored systematically by Robbins, Cannell, or O'Neill and Garriott in their discussion of Asad's proposition to approach Islam "as Muslims do"—that is, as a tradition—is that in a decisive sense that is also the most difficult thing to think; the Christian tradition also includes anthropology and anthropology's historical entanglements with colonial Christianity, empire, and the West's civilizational discourse. Indeed, it could be argued that from a certain perspective, this tradition includes all social science, philosophy, history, and our names today for the secular, for sovereignty, for media and mediation, for world, for globe, and for the very space and movement of globalization. When we think about the "global" in a concept of global Christianity, we should thus also reflect on the ways in which the very term "world" is still a fundamentally Christian concept and how, as Derrida argues, globalization—or globa*latini*zation—still means "Christianization": "Christian discourse confusedly but surely informs this doxa and all that it carries with it, beginning with the world and the names for its 'mundiality', and its vague equivalents globe, universe, earth, or cosmos (in its Pauline usage)" (Derrida 2005:54).

To be in the world today means moving within a space that is still Christian; studying Christianity as simply *a religion*, as the anthropology of Christianity does, is no doubt the most problematic aspect of its project. Christianity is anything but simply a religion; the very name "religion" is itself Christian. Approaching Christianity as an ensemble of religious institutions, rituals, and discourses without problematizing the untranslatability of religion is a profoundly depoliticizing move (see Anidjar 2014; Derrida 2002). "What is a religion?" Derrida asks. "To present oneself on the international stage, to claim the right to practice one's 'religion', to construct mosques where there were churches and synagogues is to

inscribe oneself in a political and ideological space dominated by Christianity, and therefore to engage in the obscure and equivocal struggle in which the putatively 'universal' value of the concept of religion, even of religious tolerance, has in advance been appropriated into the space of a Christian semantics" (Derrida 2001:74; see also Boyarin 1994; Masuzawa 2005). And not only semantics, but also the very institutionalization of the hegemonic Christian sense of the term "universal" today "as it dominates the philosophy of international law and of human rights" and finds it expression in international organizations such as the United Nations. This dominance also extends to current forms of teletechnology and capitalization and the "televisual hegemony of the Christian religion" (Derrida 2001:59; see also de Vries and Weber 2001; Meyer and Moors 2006). "I am struck by the muffled and almost desperate struggle of the non-Christian religions when they attempt *at the same time* to Christianize themselves *and* to defend themselves against Christianity" Derrida writes; "This holds no less for Islam than for Judaism. But at the same time that they seek to resist the fascination of emulation [*fascination spéculaire*], these religions become ever more Christian in their form, in their discourse, in their manifestation. They seek to be different and to resemble, to acquire the global legitimacy of Christianity" (Derrida 2001:73–74). I cannot help but be struck by the various ways this account resonates with a case like Nigeria, from the agonistic parallelism in the rise of Pentecostalism and radical Islamic reformism as "religions of the subject" (Larkin and Meyer 2006; Marshall 2009; see also Mahmood 2005; Roy 2006) to the spread of Islamic electronic media (Larkin 2008; see also Hirschkind 2006) and the growth of Muslim "revivals" where one can come and "meet Allah" to the autoimmune violence of Boko Haram as they suicide-bomb Christian services across the Muslim north of a country that has become dramatically Pentecostalized.[4]

Thinking about the ongoing power of Christianity also means attending to the ways in which the secular emerges from within it and how the supercessionist logic of a "self-deconstructing" Christianity enables the opposition between the religious and secular so central to political liberalism. Indeed, in this now globally hegemonic understanding of modern politics, religion comes to be designated, along with its cognates and disseminations, as the violence that must be eliminated from the political field insofar as the hallmark of liberal thought is the evacuation of conflict and violence from the political and its replacement by the (Christian) values of tolerance, agreement, deliberation, communication, and consensus. As Wendy Brown (2008) argues, "the governmentality of tolerance as it circulates through civilizational discourse has, as part of its work, the containment of the (organicist, non-Western, nonliberal) Other. . . . Nonliberal societies and practices, especially those designated as fundamentalist, are

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4. "Western education is forbidden"—"Boko" being a Hausa vernacular of the English word "book"—or perhaps "Book"?

depicted not only as relentlessly and inherently intolerant but as potentially intolerable for their putative rule by culture or religion and their concomitant devaluation of the autonomous individual—in short, their thwarting of individual autonomy with religious or cultural commandments" (152). Whether secularism is understood as a break with Christianity or as its extension, its ongoing historical privilege as definitive of the modern continues to determine the terms in which other religious forms or traditions position themselves with respect to modernity and democracy. The critical reappraisal of secularism from the perspective of such other traditions has given rise to important recent work that anthropologists of Christianity cannot afford to ignore: Mandair (2009) on Sikhism, Abeysekara (2008) on Buddhism, and Agrama (2012) and Mas (2011, forthcoming) on Islam.

This work is all the more important insofar as the centrality of religion to many forms of postcolonial violence—indeed, its rhetorical association with a primordial violence, dramatically heightened since the events of 9/11—has served to breathe new life into imperial conceptions of backwardness and barbarism and justify extremely violent politico-military interventions in the name of "civilization" and "democratic values." Asad's (2003) book *On Suicide Bombing* is exemplary in its problematization of this issue. I underscore this because when anthropologists consider the field of Christian practice and ask, "who is a Christian?" there needs to be an acute awareness of the ways in which this question is increasingly politicized. For many today, the question "who is a Christian" implies taking sides in an apocalyptic civilizational struggle of world-historical significance. One only need consider the evangelical and apocalyptic attitude of the Bush regime to the Islamic terrorist threat or the political import of the observation that the West has multiple meanings at home but, as Asad observes, often only one abroad (Asad 2007). Similarly the tenacity of Samuel Huntington's essentializing "clash of civilizations" thesis (Huntington 1996) and the new American "crusades"—military, political, and economic—that Derrida has called "the other wars of religion" (Derrida 2002:63) testify to the political overbid of religion today.

In short, anthropologists of Christianity cannot go on treating Christianity merely as a religion. This may seem like an incongruous claim to make in the context of an effort to construct a concept of Christianity that could serve a comparative anthropological project, but at the least, a continued and acute attention to anthropology's self-positioning within this "tradition" is essential to considering the ways forward for the discipline as a whole. This expanded view of the Christian tradition underlies Nancy's claim that Christianity is the very thing itself that has to be thought in order for something new to appear. Asad is aware of this, and it seems to me that he may be attempting to get at a thought of the Christian through the "back door" of an anthropology of the secular. Such philosophical or anthropological projects nonetheless have their work cut out for them. As Derrida the "spoilsport" whispers back to Nancy, such a project may be "as necessary

and fatal as it is impossible. . . . Only Christianity can do this work, that is, undo it while doing it. Dechristianization will be a Christian victory. . . . [Christianity] will still make the sacrifice of its own self-deconstruction" (Derrida 2005:54). Perhaps one of the greatest challenges for critical thought today is tracing an alternative path to the sorts of supercessionist logics that dominate current thinking about the entanglements between the Christian and the secular.

Beginning as Pentecostals Do from the Perspective of a Political Theorist

It thus may be that Asad's understanding of the Islamic tradition is too restrictive a model for the specific problems that treating Christianity as a tradition entails or for helping us elucidate the troubled relationship between anthropology and this tradition. Yet I maintain that the methodological principle behind Asad's approach is still sound and can be usefully employed for an anthropology of Pentecostalism, indeed, any form of Christianity. So if we should start as Pentecostal and charismatic Christians do, this means firstly recognizing the ways in which this form of Christianity constructs itself as an evangelical project. Against the vernacularizing tendency that privileges continuity with the past over rupture, many anthropologists of Christianity have recognized that Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity engages with local culture by polemically staging a break with it (Bialecki 2010; Casanova 2001; Coleman 2000; Haynes 2012; Marshall 2009; Meyer 1998; O'Neill 2009; Robbins 2003*a*, 2007). Casanova (2001) puts the ways in which local Pentecostalisms engage with their own cultures in these terms: "It is an uprooted local culture engaged in spiritual warfare with its own roots" (437).

So while I take O'Neill and Garriott's point that "anthropologists should turn their eye towards the kinds of problems Christian communities themselves seem to be preoccupied with" rather than debate Christianity's "cultural logic" or "cultural content" (Garriott and O'Neill 2008:388, citing Robbins 2004*a*), I still think the only way to begin as Pentecostals do is to have some sense of the various logics that might be said to characterize their project at a general level. These logics do not need to be understood in an essentializing way, and they just as often are "how" questions as "what" questions.

This approach can further what I take to be one of the aims of the anthropology of evangelical charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity going forward: to develop approaches that might enable rigorous analysis of various ways in which these forms of Christianity can be considered "global" or as having global sociopolitical effects. In other words, to provide the anthropology of Christianity hitherto focused principally on local ethnographies with the means to respond robustly to the somewhat reductive accounts offered by broad surveys of "global Christianity," such as those of Philip Jenkins (2002, 2006), or those informed by popular understandings of the American culture wars. The need for some common ground

can be illustrated by the very divergent interpretations of the politics of Pentecostalism and charismatic Christianity in the postcolonial world.[5] A comparative approach that bridges the gap between local ethnographies and the global impact of the dramatic rise of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity—the revolution that was not supposed to happen (Martin 2001)—requires the elaboration of a more theoretically ambitious framework for thinking comparatively about their social and political effects across a range of very different contexts as well as the ways, if any, in which these Christians can be understood as forming a global community.

Pentecostalism's project is a universalizing one whose project of conversion—in its programmatic form, internal rationalities, and general theological and specific doctrinal content—is remarkably uniform across the globe (Marshall 2009: 4). One of the things that makes Pentecostals and charismatics distinctive and so successful is their development of an extremely robust paradigm for thinking globally, which is to say "global spiritual warfare." Intimately associated with the project of global evangelism, it is increasingly enacted through the growing phenomenon of reverse mission, as illustrated, for example, by the surprising success of Nigerian Pentecostalism in the Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere as well as a mounting sense of global "manifest destiny" on the part of subaltern populations of the global south (Burgess, Knibbe, and Quaas 2010; Kalu 2010). The spiritual warfare Pentecostals engage in with their own uprooted cultural roots—attempting to make a complete break with the past—is the local manifestation of this universalizing project. So in order to think comparatively about the ways in which this warfare plays out in any given context, we need to have a sense of its programmatic form. Considering its programmatic aspects does not mean saying the program goes according to plan. On the contrary, as Foucault (2004) points out, its effects "can only be strategic or programmatic. It never works. But it is with respect to a program that one can say it never works" (405). In this sense we should consider local Pentecostalisms as contingent effects of struggle, as so many improvised variations on a program.

In the context of elaborating what a minimal programmatic form might look like, one can, for example, analyze Pentecostal political theology and compare it, say, with that of Eastern Orthodoxy or liberal democratic theory without essentializing. Political concepts are very often prescriptive,

which may be, as Robbins points out, one of the difficulties anthropologists have with them. But I think it is very difficult to understand Pentecostalism's effects both locally and globally without thinking about the ways in which it functions as a prescriptive regime and positions itself with respect to competing regimes. In this sense, political theology is extremely useful for thinking comparatively about the ways in which Pentecostalism intersects with local political formations as well as global ones.

For those worried about the term "theology," we could say that Pentecostal political theology is to Pentecostal conceptions of authority, legitimation, community, and freedom as liberal political philosophy is to liberalism; a general conceptualization of the ways in which power can and should be distributed, exercised, and legitimated, but one that can take a variety of specific forms in practice. We could think about the ways in which Pentecostalism provides a model for the distribution of divine power in the world that differs from other forms of Christianity, such as, say, Catholicism, or from "secular" forms, such as democracy or totalitarianism. The dominant conception of sovereignty in the Western tradition is a vertical and absolute one modeled on God the Father, as a power greater than which none can be thought, such as we find in Hobbes (1982 [1660]) or elaborated by Carl Schmitt (2005) as a power beyond the law: "sovereign is he who declares the state of exception" (5). The Pentecostal model operates an inflection on this according to the model of the Holy Spirit's descent at Pentecost, where the absolute transcendent power of the Father takes the form of a horizontal, spectral, and immanent dissemination of the Spirit through language and diaspora—a tongue of fire on every head (Marshall 2010; Norton 2011:394). Understanding a political theology does not mean "doing" theology—using the conceptual tools of a political theorist and field methods of an anthropologist, I was able to develop my account of Pentecostal political theology in Nigeria based on ethnographic material. This empirical research brought me to argue that Pentecostalism there takes the form of a negative political theology, which is to say that its conception of sovereignty did not provide grounds for theocratic authority nor could it provide a stable basis for community.

This sort of approach can be extremely helpful in thinking critically about the ways in which Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity is said to be illiberal and what forms this might take in different contexts. One man's illiberalism might be another's revolutionary struggle; given Pentecostalism's political ambivalence, either interpretation or even others could be possible. A recent conversation in the *South Atlantic Quarterly* among anthropologists of Pentecostalism and theologians engaging with Badiou's and other continental philosophers' fascination with St. Paul explored the working premise that new forms of global charismatic Christianity might offer new possibilities for global critique. And yet, in the absence of attention to the specific political aspects of this question, the global or universal aspect of both was rather

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5. A quick, nonexhaustive survey sees it variably characterized as conservative or antidemocratic (Bastian 1993; Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose 1996; Chesnut 1997; Gifford 1987, 1988; Jenkins 2002; 2006), a foundationalist (or indeed "fundamentalist") reaction to late global capitalism (Comaroff 2009; Comaroff and Comaroff 2002), individualistic and largely apolitical (Martin 2001; Steigenga 2001), largely pragmatist (Cleary and Stewart-Gambino 1997), potentially fostering democratic culture or new forms of engaged citizenship (Austin-Broos 1997; Burdick 1993; Englund 2003; Freston 2001; O'Neill 2009; Stoll 1990), or fundamentally politically ambivalent, a failed foundationalism caught between theocratic ambition and a powerful prophetic and quasi-democratic impulse (Marshall 2009, 2010).

more posited than systematically problematized, references to St. Paul and empire notwithstanding (Engelke and Robbins 2010 with Bialecki 2010; Coleman 2010; Meyer 2010; Smith 2010). Mike Davis (2004) has argued in the *New Left Review* that the demographics of Pentecostalism make it potentially a new revolutionary force, or if not, the best we have to work with: "Indeed, for the moment at least, Marx has yielded the historical stage to Mohammed and the Holy Ghost. If God died in the cities of the industrial revolution, he has risen again in the postindustrial cities of the developing world" (30). He credits reformist Islam and Pentecostalism with articulating the most significant response to the process of "urban involution" (labor's self-overexploitation) that characterizes the third world megalopolis: "with the Left still largely missing from the slum, the eschatology of Pentecostalism admirably refuses the inhuman destiny of the Third World city that *Slums* warns about. It also sanctifies those who, in every structural and existential sense, truly live in exile" (Davis 2004: 34). This is a very bold and broad claim, one I am highly skeptical about yet that deserves greater investigation and reflection. In response to Davis's optimism, it could be argued that Pentecostalism constructs close affinities with neoliberal finance capital as well as contemporary ideas of debt and prosperity and thus acts in many ways as a handmaiden of capital and empire rather than an antidote to it (Marshall 2011; see also Coleman 2012; Hackett 1995; Haynes 2012; O'Neill 2012). Nimi Wariboko, a Pentecostal theologian, speculates that the spirit of Pentecostalism today may be nothing more than the spirit of the latest stage of capitalism (Wariboko 2011:154).

The paradigm of global spiritual warfare with its apocalyptic visions, the violence of its language, and its obsession with enemies also demands that we pay closer attention to the politics of "who is a Christian" today. As Davis's account intimates, apocalyptic thought has long been and continues to be a political weapon for the dispossessed. Apocalyptics say let the world go down, "I have no spiritual investment in the world as it is" (Barber 2011; Taubes 2003:103). As Derrida (1992) argues, "the sort of fear mongering apocalyptic discourse of politicians or religious mystagogues is not only destined to mislead the people in order to get to reactionary, backward-looking, conservative ends. On the contrary—nothing is less conservative than the apocalyptic genre" (29). Apocalyptic discourse has also been, for a century or so, a form of more or less playful despair among intellectuals. The themes of exhaustion, the "end," the "late," or the "post" are ubiquitous in contemporary theory today and when turned on religion often take the form of dire warnings against a redoubtable enemy: the autoimmune, schizophrenic constellation of religious fanaticism and capitalism run amok (Brown 2006; Connolly 2008; Zizek 2010). Or, as Nancy baldly puts it, "hyperfascism" (Nancy 2008:5). A dialogue needs to be established between those who theorize about the dangers of contemporary forms of religiosity at a global level and those who study them closely.

Finally, while anthropologists may not principally be engaged in thinking about the politics of Pentecostalism, there is one crucial sense in which the politics of its universalizing project intersects with their investigation of culture. As I said above, recognizing the inessential nature of culture means that cultures are by definition *vulnerable*. Pentecostalism is a universalizing project that antagonistically engages with other cultural and religious forms, often violently, sometimes putting them in jeopardy. It is very difficult to see how this cultural vulnerability might be safeguarded or whether indeed it should be insofar as it begs the question of who wants to protect these cultures, for what reasons, and on behalf of what principles. Insofar as anthropologists have an acute awareness of how these struggles play out locally, I would urge them to engage in thinking about their political stakes more systematically.

As an engaged political theorist committed to democratic forms of life and struggles for emancipation, I am less agnostic on these questions, but as my discussion should have made clear, taking an engaged view on the politics of Pentecostalism is a complex and risk-filled enterprise. At the very least, any critical approach will require the deconstruction of the binaries that define political modernity's self-conception: secular/religious, science/belief, knowledge/faith, reason/unreason. Concerning the problem of the politics of engagement with and critical representation of our ethnographic subjects, let me briefly reiterate in closing that I think the only political approach that could carry forward the fundamentally democratic impulse behind the anthropologists' and political theorists' concern to respect alterity is not one that posits pluralism but rather equality as its principle, or more precisely, equality that emerges agonistically, polemically, from within multiplicity. Otherwise, we are caught between the horns of a political dilemma. On the one hand, a liberal governmentality of tolerance does not respect difference, and an idealist logics of consensus, translation, and communicative rationality do not resolve differences but rather police the lines of who can speak. On the other hand, the catastrophic political logic of the radical heterogeneity of regimes of speech means that democratic politics becomes impossible, as Jacques Rancière (1997) argues, "because of some primal alterity or debt, because of a debt to the law of the Other that can never be repaid" (34). Following Rancière, I believe that pluralism does not mean identifying this or that category within a population that can be granted rights or that there are so many different forms of culture that must be recognized and must recognize each other. This logic implies that the lines of inclusion and exclusion are determined *prior* to true politics through ordering principles he calls "the police" (Rancière 1995). Rather "*effective* pluralism means *polemical* pluralism, a pluralism that creates instances of equality" (Rancière 1997:35). Difference, as a political or ethical ground, is undecidable. It always runs the risk of being recuperated in particularist struggles that operate under the name of a universal. Recognizing this means acknowledging that our conceptualizations of religion,

of Christianity, of "who is a Christian" are always already political.

Acknowledgments

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