

# KLEINE BEITRÄGE

## WHAT IS PASTORAL ANTHROPOLOGY?

by Hermann Janssen

Many missionaries and local church leaders make attempts to study privately anthropology or to read anthropological books and magazines. They do this in order to come to a better understanding of the people and communities whom they serve as ministers. Others are even more ambitious: they want to initiate programmes of adaptation so that the Word of God and the Christian liturgy might be better understood and more fully experienced by the people.

However, after some time, many of these dedicated priests, brothers, sisters and lay leaders become frustrated with their studies and some may not touch an anthropological publication anymore for the rest of their lives. What could be the reasons for this frustration?

Well, it is surely true to say that most of the scholarly publications have not been written for missionary readers, but rather for students of anthropology or even for experts (who seem to know more and more about less and less). It is also true to point out that the anthropological terminology is rather confusing, sometimes even inconsistent. The differentiation between ethnology, ethnography, cultural anthropology, social anthropology, sociology and otherologies of the behavioral sciences is rather vague, though we cannot deny that there have been different approaches to the science of man over the past century.

On the other hand, the expectations of some private students of anthropology seem to be rather ambitious. We must become aware that anthropology is not the magic solution to all our pastoral problems, because these problems do not only deal with man as a social being but more so with man under the powerful influence of God's Word and Spirit. Furthermore, in spite of a tremendous amount of field work and careful anthropological interpretations, the real knowledge of all anthropologists combined is still very limited, since anthropology is a rather young science.

Finally, only in recent years, especially since the Second Vatican Council, relevant attempts have been made to apply anthropological findings and insights to pastoral needs and programmes. In the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*) special praise is given to those "who work in universities or in scientific institutes and whose historical and scientific-religious research promotes knowledge of peoples and of religions. Thus they help the heralds of the gospel and prepare for dialogue with non-Christians." (41) This is very encouraging!

In what way can anthropology help the heralds of the Gospel? Before we try to meet this challenge, let us first listen to the views of some outstanding philosophers and poets.

The word 'anthropologos' (anthropologist) is used by the great Greek philosopher Aristotle — seemingly for the first time in history — in a rather disparaging manner. He writes in his *Nicomachean Ethics*:

"The good man is not a gossip (anthropo-logos); for he will speak neither about himself nor about another, since he cares not to be praised nor for others to be blamed; nor again is he given to praise." (Eth. Nic. IV, 3, 1125a, 5-7; in: Sir DAVID ROSS [transl.], *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, London, 1963, p. 93f.)



Rather cynical is G. K. CHESTERTON, when he writes:

"It is a pity that the word Anthropology has been degraded to the study of anthropoids. It is now incurably associated with squabbles between prehistoric professors (in more senses than one) about whether a chip or stone is the tooth of a man or an ape; sometimes settled, as in that famous case, when it was found to be the tooth of a pig." (G. K. CHESTERTON, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, New York, 1956, p. 160)

Finally, Okot p'Bitek, a contemporary poet from Uganda, has satirized the shallow sophistication of anthropologists and their colleagues in the following words:

"We will arrest  
All the village poets,  
Musicians and tribal dancers,  
Put in detention  
Folk-story tellers  
And myth makers,  
The sustainers of  
Village morality.

We'll disband  
The nest of court historians,  
Glorifiers of the past,  
We will ban  
The stupid village anthem of  
'Backwards ever,  
Forwards never!'

To the gallows  
With all the Professors  
Of Anthropology  
And teachers of African History.  
A bonfire  
We'll make of their works,  
We'll destroy all the anthologies  
Of African literature  
And close down  
All the schools  
Of African Studies."

(*Song of Ocol*, Nairobi, 1970, p. 29f.)

Still, in spite of all these ancient and contemporary men of wisdom and wit, we will humbly make an attempt to apply anthropology to our pastoral needs and programmes, though, as we will see, this has its deep rooted problems.

Modern sociologists and anthropologists try again and again to define their subject. J. E. GOLDTHORPE, the author of a widely used sociology textbook, writes:

"Sociology is the scientific study of human social behaviour. It represents an attempt to apply to the study of human society the same scientific method and approach that have been so dramatically successful in yielding an understanding of the physical world. Using scientific method, men have gained an understanding of the stars, the sun, the planets; of this planet in particular; of the forms of life that inhabit it; of man as an animal, and of the social behaviour of animals of other species than our own. The quest is far from



finished, and the search for more knowledge and understanding goes on more ardently than ever in the modern world; but the achievements of science have been very great, and we now understand many things that were hidden from our ancestors."

"Why not, then, apply the same methods to understanding ourselves? For the last 150 years or so some men have done just that, have tried to turn man's scientific eye upon himself as a social being and study human social behaviour and social organization in the same spirit as others have studied physical or chemical phenomena, or the social behaviour and social organization of other animals. And though the findings may be modest and tentative compared with those of physics — and we certainly cannot claim anything as spectacular as space research — nevertheless the enterprise has yielded solid results..." (GOLDTHORPE, J. E., *An Introduction to Sociology*, Cambridge University Press, Second Edition 1974, p. 3)

This rather lengthy quotation will have to be evaluated together with the following words of the anthropologist and author of a textbook in social anthropology, LUCY MAIR. She writes:

"Anthropology means 'talking about man', as psychology means 'talking about mind'. The cliché 'I'm interested in people' and the exclamation 'Aren't foreigners extraordinary!' must have been current in some form or the other since man learnt to use language..."

Anthropology is sometimes thought of as the study which tells us 'all about man'. To those who take this view, it comprises in fact the subjects that were flourishing about the middle of the nineteenth century, when the idea of a 'science of man' first began to take shape — physical anthropology, social (cultural) anthropology, archaeology and linguistics. An alternative view is that social anthropology is a branch of sociology, and its nearest neighbours are the other social sciences." (MAIR, L., *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1968, p. 1)

These two descriptions of sociology resp. social anthropology should make a sensitive person shiver. They make man an animal or a physical-chemical phenomenon to be objectively studied or to be talked about. To be fair, we must admit that not all anthropologists take this view. Most anthropologists will take into account the biological dimension of man as well as the impact of environment on the formation of human communities; however, they will first of all see man as a social being. This means man is depending on *relationships*.

Man lives his life in a network of complicated social and religious relationships. He has to learn and to work out his relationship with his fellow men, may they be blood relatives, marriage partners, in-laws, trading partners, political enemies, ethnic strangers or members of different language groups and races.

In tribal societies it is moreover of vital importance that the living communities maintain a proper relationship with the communities of the dead or the ancestors. There are fear relationships towards evil people (e.g. witches, black magicians), evil soul spirits and autonomous evil spirits, monsters and tricksters, who constantly threaten the well-being of the community.

Finally, man and communities feel themselves, especially in times of danger and crisis, under the mysterious, often ambivalent power of occult forces or creative and regulative deities.

To maintain, strengthen or even to exploit these socio-religious relationships with individual people, communities, ancestors, spirits and divine powers, man has always to keep the channels of communication open. Communication is



established in two ways: *dialogue and interaction*. Traditional forms of dialogue are mainly: gossip, formal meetings and court hearings on the one hand, and prayers, spells and songs on the other. Interactions may take the form of co-operation in subsistence economy, exchange ceremonies and tribal warfare, but also offerings, ritual and feasts.

To summarize we can say: social anthropology deals in a systematic way with the various forms of socio-religious relationships and communications. To be able to understand these relationships and communications, the anthropologist cannot sit behind his desk or observe the behaviour of people from a cool corner, but to a certain extent he has to take part in the dialogue and interaction of the people. We may call this: *participating anthropological research*.

Surely, anthropology is more than research. The results or, better, the experiences of his research have to be compiled, interpreted and evaluated in a systematic manner. Here the scientific methods of tabulation statistics, comparison of social data, psychological and historical interpretations etc. have to be employed.

*Pastoral anthropology* has to be based on these principles and methods of social anthropology. However, it deals not only with the socio-religious relationships of the *homo religiosus* in tribal societies but as well with the socio-religious relationships of the *homo christianus* in these societies. Moreover, pastoral anthropology is supposed to "help the heralds of the gospel and to prepare for dialogue with non-Christians". This means we cannot be satisfied with superficial folkloristic or ethnographic collecting of customs and cultural data, so that "we may understand our people better". We have also to be aware of the colonial trap which is hidden under some missionary attempts of adaptation in the fields of catechetics, liturgy and moral theology "for the people".

Pastoral Anthropology, as I understand it, is the attempt to assist church leaders — whether expatriate or local — and the people to enter into a meaningful Christian communication, based on the systematic exploration of the socio-religious relationships and aspirations of tribal societies. Pastoral Anthropology is therefore not a magic pastoral tool but rather a catalyst for Christian and non-Christian Communities.

#### INTRODUCTORY READINGS:

- NIDA, E. A., *Customs and Cultures, Anthropology for Christian Missions*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1954.
- LUZBETAK, L. J., *The Church and Cultures, An Applied Anthropolgy for Religious Workers*, Divine Word Publications, Techy, Illinois, 1963.
- LESSA, A. W. and E. V. VOGT, *Reader in Comparative Religion, An Anthropological Approach*, Harper & Row, 3rd. Ed., New York, 1965.
- SECRETARIATUS PRO NON-CHRISTIANS, *Religions, Fundamental Themes for a Dialogistic Understanding*, Editrice Ancora, Roma, 1970.
- SHORTER, A., *African Culture and the Christian Church, An Introduction to Social and Pastoral Anthropology*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1973.

#### MITTEILUNGEN

XIV. Tagung der Deutschen Vereinigung für Religionsgeschichte. — Die XIV. Tagung der Deutschen Vereinigung für Religionsgeschichte findet vom 15. bis 18. Mai 1978 in Bonn statt. — Sie steht unter dem Thema „Leben und Tod im Lichte religiöser Symbolik“.