



# Who is a Christian?

## Toward a dialogic approach in the anthropology of Christianity

William Garriott  
*James Madison University*

Kevin Lewis O'Neill  
*Indiana University-Bloomington*

### Abstract

This article aims to contribute to the continued formation of an anthropology of Christianity. We argue that anthropologists should adopt a more dialogic approach to the anthropological study of Christianity, one that shifts the concern *from* the problems posed by Christianity to anthropology, *to* the problems posed by Christianity to Christians themselves. In particular, we argue that the problem of determining who and what counts as a Christian is not a strictly anthropological problem, but is a potent source of debate within Christian communities. Attending to such debate offers a window into what is at stake in the lives of Christians themselves, and thus has the capacity to provide a non-essentializing foundation for the anthropology of Christianity as a comparative project. We begin with a review of recent anthropological literature and conclude with a set of ethnographic illustrations that show the import of such a shift for future research.

### Key Words

Catholic • Christianity • comparison • dialogic • evangelical • Guatemala • Islam • mega-churches

### INTRODUCTION

Christianity can no longer be avoided. Currently one-third of the world's population identify as Christians. As of 2025 this figure is expected to rise from 2 to 2.6 billion, with sharp increases in the number of evangelical, Pentecostal and Catholic Christians. This follows a pattern that has remained constant over the past 30 years. For example, from 1970 to 1997 the number of evangelical Christians rose from 185 million to 645 million. By 2020 there could be as many as 1 billion, at which point evangelical Christians alone would far outnumber the world's Buddhists and approximate the world's Hindus (Jenkins, 2002; Johnson and Barrett, 2005). To put it simply,

Christianity has 'forced itself upon us' (Engelke, 2005) and anthropologists (of religion and otherwise) must take notice.

To this end, a growing number of scholars have been working to develop what has been termed an 'anthropology of Christianity'. Central to this project is the idea that Christianity has been insufficiently examined in anthropology, for cultural and historical reasons specific to the discipline. While there have certainly been studies of Christianity scattered throughout the anthropological literature, there has been little sense among the authors of these studies of a shared intellectual purpose. And in instances where Christians or Christianity have constituted an aspect of the study, anthropologists have often been reluctant to make this aspect a focus of their work. The result has been that Christianity has tended to be inadequately analyzed and under-theorized in anthropology, a situation which those working to develop an anthropology of Christianity seek to remedy.

A key figure in this regard is Joel Robbins. In an influential paper (2003) he cites two difficulties that stand in the way of developing a viable anthropology of Christianity. The first has to do with the unique cultural and historical relationship between Christianity and anthropology, one which has tended to make Christians into 'repugnant cultural others' (Harding, 1991) when considered from an anthropological perspective. The second is more general, and has to do with the difficulties of conducting substantive comparative research on a cultural object such as 'Christianity' without unduly reifying, essentializing or normalizing that object in the process. Robbins argues that anthropologists must overcome the limitations of the first difficulty in order to 'get on' with addressing the second. He does not, however, offer any particular recommendations as to how this might occur. In this article we argue that addressing the problematic relationship between anthropology and Christianity is a necessary first step in developing a viable anthropology of Christianity. Moreover, we argue that doing this offers a solution to the problem of launching the anthropology of Christianity as a comparative project.

We begin by reviewing recent work in the anthropology of Christianity in more detail. We concentrate in particular on the work of Joel Robbins and his interlocutors. Robbins is certainly not the only anthropologist attempting to set the agenda for the anthropology of Christianity (see e.g. Scott, 2005). But his work deserves attention because it has been the most explicit in its insistence that Christianity be approached 'on its own terms'. He has articulated this project as one of studying the 'cultural logic' or 'cultural content' of Christianity from a comparative perspective, drawing inspiration from the work of Marshall Sahlins and Luis Dumont (Robbins, 2004a). While we agree with Robbins that Christianity is best approached 'on its own terms' from a comparative perspective, we suggest a complementary approach. Rather than debate Christianity's particular 'cultural logic', we propose that anthropologists develop a more thoroughly 'dialogic' perspective.

The term 'dialogic', of course, is rooted in the work of M.M. Bakhtin (1981; cf. Mannheim and Tedlock, 1995). Though developed specifically in reference to the modern novel as a literary form, the term carries more general relevance regarding the conditions of knowledge and practical activity in human interactions that are essential to our argument. Specifically, Bakhtin's concept of dialogue points to a situation of competing claims to truth and authority as the condition in terms of which all human

interaction takes place. Such interaction contains an awareness of this condition, if only tacitly, such that even a statement by a single person maintains a dialogic quality. Attending to the dialogic quality of interactions shifts the focus from the individual subject to the intersubjective space between subjects. Similarly, it shifts the focus from the purported structure underlying human action to structure as an emergent property of human interaction (Mannheim and Tedlock, 1995: 5). As Michael Holquist, the editor and translator of Bakhtin's most specific work on dialogue puts it: 'A word, discourse, language or culture undergoes "dialogization" when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same things . . . Dialogue may be external (between two different people) or internal (between an earlier and later self)' (Bakhtin, 1981: 427).

Bakhtin's work on dialogue has often been read to prefigure the coming of a kind of postmodern consciousness. But the richness of the term resists such restrictive periodization. Rather, we take Bakhtin's development of the concept of dialogue to shed light on an essential property of all human interaction. From this perspective, Christianity has maintained a dialogic quality from its inception, generally because it is a discursive phenomenon like any other, but more specifically because of the cosmopolitan milieu from which it emerged (Roetzel, 2002).<sup>1</sup>

We further articulate the dialogic approach and bring it to bear on the anthropology of Christianity by revisiting the two difficulties – the one historical/cultural, the other comparative – Robbins gives as standing in the way of the anthropology of Christianity's development. We show how these two problems have emerged in this literature and offer a means to address them. Specifically, we argue that by adopting a more thoroughly dialogic approach, anthropologists of Christianity can overcome the first epistemological hurdle by shifting the concern *from* the problems posed by Christianity to anthropology, *to* the problems posed by Christianity to Christians themselves. Moreover, we argue that the problem of determining *who is a Christian*, the key question faced by those seeking to develop a comparative anthropology of Christianity, is a rich site of investigation for future research conducted in dialogic terms. This is because the question 'who is a Christian?' is not just limited to anthropologists but is a potent source of debate within and around Christian communities themselves. Attending to such debate, and positioning oneself as a researcher relative to it, offers a window into what is at stake in the lives of Christians, revealing the 'logical trajectories' (Scott, 2005: 106) by which Christians attempt to live as Christians, and by which they evaluate this attempt in others as well.<sup>2</sup> We conclude with a set of ethnographic illustrations showing the import of such a shift for future work in the anthropology of Christianity.

## WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

Today, there exist a growing number of anthropologists working to develop an anthropology of Christianity. While this project has many roots, the anthropology of Christianity received a major push in 2003, when Joel Robbins published his influential article, 'What is a Christian? Notes Toward an Anthropology of Christianity'. This essay served as the editorial introduction to a special issue of the journal *Religion* centered on the theme of 'The Anthropology of Christianity'. In this essay Robbins attempted to set the agenda for the anthropology of Christianity. He began by making a crucial distinction between what he termed the anthropology of Christianity *in itself* and the anthropology

of Christianity *for itself*. The anthropology of Christianity in itself refers simply to any anthropological study in which Christianity is taken as an object of analysis. Guided by recent review essays (Meyer, 2004; Robbins, 2004b), one can easily construct a robust list of anthropologists who have studied Christians in one form or another: Herskovits (1941), Weber (1958), Mintz (1974), Wallace (1978), Taussig (1980), Hurston (1981), Bauman (1983), Comaroff (1985), Greenhouse (1986), Peacock and Tyson (1989), Barker (1990), Hefner (1993), Csordas (1994, 2001), Comaroff and Comaroff (1991, 1997), Austin-Broos (1997), Toulis (1997), Cannell (1999), Meyer (1999), Harding (2000), Crapanzano (2000) and Coleman (2000).

The anthropology of Christianity for itself, on the other hand, refers to a more self-conscious enterprise, one in which 'people working in different geographic areas publish in the same fora, read one another's work, recognize the relevance of that work for their own projects, and seek to develop a set of shared questions to be examined comparatively' (Robbins, 2003: 192). Robbins's argument is that there does not yet exist an anthropology of Christianity for itself. It is an argument that anthropologists now echo to an increasing extent. In an article entitled 'The Christianity of Anthropology', Fenella Cannell writes:

Despite the existence of distinguished ethnographies on Christian areas there has been a tendency to avoid or under-theorize the subject of Christianity or to assume that its meanings are 'obvious' because they are part of the culture from which anthropologists themselves are largely drawn. (Cannell, 2005: 340)

Taking such assumptions as a point of departure allows the anthropology of Christianity to be construed (fruitfully, in our view) as a new endeavor. This leaves open the question of how such a project might proceed. Robbins looks towards the anthropology of Islam as a source of inspiration for what an anthropology of Christianity for itself might one day look like. At least since the publication of Clifford Geertz's *Islam Observed* (1968), anthropologists working on Islam have increasingly understood themselves to be part of a scholarly community working on the same 'discursive tradition' (Asad, 1986), regardless of where their research may be located (see the influential essay by el-Zein, 1977). The anthropology of Christianity, it is hoped, will one day resemble this model.

Yet there are important limitations to this comparison. The most significant is that Christianity within the history of anthropological thought has long been understood as a 'problematic' object of study in ways that Islam has not. This is evident, for example, in Geertz's (2005) account of the transition in American anthropology in the 1950s and 1960s from the study of 'primitive' and 'native' religions to 'world religions'. As Geertz himself describes it, his work on Islam was an easily and unproblematically assimilated component of this shift. This is due largely to the fact that it maintained continuity with earlier studies by continuing to rely on tacit distinctions between the familiar and the foreign to clearly define the object of anthropological analysis. As Geertz states:

The usual tack [of the anthropologist] is to begin with our own, more or less unexamined, everyday sense of what 'the family', 'the state', or, in the case at hand,

'religion' comes to, what counts for *us* as kinship, or government, or faith, and what, family-resemblance style, looks . . . well . . . resemblant, amongst those whose life-ways we are trying to portray. (Geertz, 2005: 5)

Working with such a conception of the anthropological project, Islam can be imagined as sufficiently foreign while Christianity remains *impossibly* familiar. This fact has not been lost on anthropologists of Islam. Indeed, much of Talal Asad's seminal work can be read as an examination of precisely this binary as it has enabled certain kinds of anthropological knowledge-making while occluding others (see Asad, 1986, 1993a, 2003). This is particularly true in his essay, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*. Here Asad must first make a case for the very idea that there is something to be questioned about the way Islam has emerged as an object of anthropological investigation. The notion that the object of investigation in the anthropology of Islam is, simply, 'Islam' may seem obvious. 'But', Asad cautions, 'to conceptualize Islam as the object of an *anthropological* study is not as simple a matter as some writers would have us suppose' (Asad, 1986: 1; emphasis in original). As we have shown, simplicity of conceptualization has not been the problem for the anthropology of Christianity. On the contrary, the question of how to make Christianity conceptualizable as an object of anthropological study has been the key difficulty.

Robbins, for his part, clearly recognizes this, explaining that Christians are at once too similar and too different from anthropologists to merit focused attention: 'Neither real others nor real comrades', Robbins writes, 'Christians wherever they are found make anthropologists recoil by unsettling the fundamental schemes by which the discipline organizes the world into the familiar and the foreign' (2003: 197). Similarly, noting Susan Harding's (1991) characterization of Christians as 'repugnant cultural others', Cannell (with echoes of Hegel) addresses Christianity as 'the impossible religion' (2006), explaining: '[Christianity] has seemed at once the most tediously familiar and the most threatening of the religious traditions for a social science' (Cannell, 2006: 30). Likewise, Matthew Engelke, during a thoughtful analysis of Christian belief and method, writes on the problematic role of Christianity in the history of anthropological thought. Dealing specifically with the work of Victor Turner and E.E. Evans-Pritchard (both converts to Roman Catholicism), he states: 'But when we read [the work of Turner and Evans-Pritchard] we should take note of the moments when they slipped out of a clearly professional frame and treated such considerations as a mixture of personal and intellectual challenges – when [Christian] belief, in other words, became method' (Engelke, 2002: 76–9).

Thus the problematic status of Christianity within anthropology constitutes the primary obstacle to establishing a viable anthropology of Christianity. Indeed, Robbins writes in his influential essay that 'the anthropology of Christianity is unlikely to move along' unless the 'cultural factors' within anthropology that continue to render Christianity problematic are adequately addressed (Robbins, 2003: 194–5). But how, then, should they be addressed? One of Robbins's own solutions seems to be that anthropologists of Christianity might overcome their stigmatized identity for the purposes of getting on with the anthropology of Christianity. While this is certainly a necessary practical step, its implication is to leave the problematic status of Christianity insufficiently examined, if not explicitly repressed. Such a solution, while useful in the short

term, is unsustainable in the long run. To establish a more viable solution, we return to the problem of Christianity itself.

As noted earlier, the unique and often contentious historical and cultural relationship between Christianity and anthropology makes Christians at once too similar and too different when viewed from an anthropological perspective. This creates a problem when anthropologists attempt to understand Christians 'in their own terms', because Christian claims regarding, for instance, the bases of knowledge or the limits of tolerance are often figured in ways that are not just different from the anthropologist's claims on such topics, but specifically opposed to them by being derived from the same cultural milieu. Thus, as Robbins concludes,

[T]o 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 . . . Given the risks involved in recuperating this kind of world view to sense, it is not surprising that mostly anthropologists do not go out of their way to do so. (Robbins, 2003: 193)

Everything hinges here on what it means for Christians to 'make sense in their own terms'. The question then becomes: How are we to understand this sense-making process? What are its terms? And is incommensurability between Christian and anthropological sense-making practices the only possible outcome? A brief return to the anthropology of Islam may help clarify the issue.

A key point of comparison between the anthropology of Islam and the anthropology of Christianity is that the former has been able to establish a viable comparative project, despite the intellectual obstacles standing in the way of such an endeavor. Even more significant, according to Robbins, is that this project has arisen despite early arguments against it (e.g. el-Zein, 1977) and in the absence of sophisticated theoretical arguments to support it (Robbins, 2003: 194). While Robbins is correct in his assertion that establishing the theoretical foundations for comparison has been of less concern than 'getting on with the anthropology of Islam', this does not mean that significant strides have not been made. Asad's *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* is a case in point. Though his definition of Islam as a 'discursive tradition that relates itself to the founding texts of the Qu'ran and Hadith' (Asad, 1986: 14) may not satisfy, understanding the process by which he arrived at this definition is instructive.

Asad begins this text by rejecting a number of formulations of Islam as an anthropological object. One that he rejects is an approach which takes Islam as 'the anthropologist's label for a heterogenous collection of items, each of which has been designated Islamic by informants' (Asad, 1986: 1). Though the idea that 'Islam is simply what Muslims everywhere say it is' is, for Asad, a 'sensible sociological rule', this position is ultimately dismissed as inadequate to the task of identifying Islam as an 'analytic object of study'. This is because 'there are everywhere Muslims who say that what other people take to be Islam is not really Islam at all' – a paradox which cannot be resolved simply by limiting a study to the beliefs and practices of a particular group or population. Indeed, as Asad stresses, 'A Muslim's beliefs about the beliefs and practices of others *are* his own beliefs. And like all such beliefs, they animate and are sustained by his social relations with others' (1986: 2; emphasis in original).

It is important to understand why Asad rejects this position. Though he spends no more than a paragraph doing so in his critique, its dismissal is the precondition for his more programmatic statements regarding how Islam should be conceptualized anthropologically. In fact, Asad's concluding remarks are similar to this initially rejected position. He states:

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 heterogenous collection of beliefs, artifacts, customs, and morals. It is a tradition. (1986: 14, emphasis added)

The distinction here is subtle but significant: anthropologists should begin not with *what* their interlocutors do, but *as* their interlocutors do. For Muslims, according to Asad, this means proceeding from the concept of a discursive tradition in which are included Islam's foundational texts. It is in relation to this tradition that the practitioners' conceptions and understandings regarding what is appropriate practice – and the relationship of a present practice to a previous (and possibly future) one – become important for the construction and maintenance of the discursive tradition itself. It is less the relative conformity of particular beliefs and practices to some ideal-typical model of Islam that is at issue, than 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, as practitioners 'aspire to coherence' in their practice (1986: 14ff.; see also Hirschkind, 2001).

Asad makes less of this aspiration (to 'coherence' or otherwise) than one might want. And the dialogic quality of this approach is sorely missed in his later work, which takes a decidedly more practice-oriented approach (e.g. Asad, 1993b). Nevertheless, it is against the backdrop of this aspiration, 'the efforts of practitioners to achieve coherence', and the debates such efforts inspire, that Asad's most programmatic rendering of this project should be understood:

Islam as the object of anthropological understanding should be approached as a discursive tradition that connects variously with the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledges. (Asad, 1986: 7)

If the anthropology of Christianity begins this way, it may possibly be led to similar kinds of textual sources such as the Bible, or to the person of Jesus Christ. More basically, however, if the anthropologist begins as Christians do, he or she will be confronted with a strikingly familiar problematic: the problem of Christianity itself. For as the numerous historical and ethnographic accounts of Christians and Christianity demonstrate, setting the terms for determining what and who counts as a Christian has been an incessant preoccupation of Christians and Christianity (to say nothing of its detractors) since its inception. As such it marks a research priority and a foundation upon which the comparative anthropology of Christianity might be undertaken. To put

it another way: Rather than debate Christianity's 'cultural content' (Robbins, 2004a) – Is Christianity essentially other-worldly? Is Christianity essentially individualistic? Is Christianity essentially a-political? – anthropologists should turn their eye towards the kinds of problems Christian communities themselves seem to be preoccupied with. This would allow for the exploration of patterns of problematization in cross-cultural perspective, while also keeping the project rigorously ethnographic.

To illustrate this point, we return to Robbins's opening question, 'What is a Christian?' We show how this question is operative in a number of different ethnographic contexts and on a variety of scales. It is important to note, however, that the following is not intended to provide an exhaustive literature review or a full ethnographic treatment; this article is primarily concerned with suggesting a line of research rather than presenting the findings of one. The aim of the next section is, then, rather modest. We simply want to provide examples of *when*, *where*, and *how* Christians talk about *who is a Christian* and suggest the comparative potential of the themes that emerge through such debate. We argue that these themes constitute what Scott (2005) terms 'logical trajectories'. That is, they are instances in which particularly Christian problematics are brought to the fore. Insofar as they are 'logical' they are relatively systemic and bespeak a certain coherence. Yet insofar as they are 'trajectories' the paths on which these logics lead practitioners remains open-ended. Thus they are systemic without being totalizing; consistent without being constrictive.

One point should be made at the outset: as should be clear from the examples, we are not suggesting an examination only of debates pure and simple among Christians or about Christianity, in a manner comparable to that of Deborah Schiffrin (1984) in her study of the role argument plays in Jewish culture. Nor are we arguing that there is a particularly Christian form of argumentation, for in some cases the attempt to live as a 'good Christian' goes a long way in stifling any formal debate or open conflict (Greenhouse, 1986). Rather, we argue that anthropologists should develop an appreciation for the dialogic processes – including but not limited to debate and dialogue proper – through which Christians and Christianity emerge – 'Christianity' itself, like 'culture' more generally, always being an 'emergent' phenomenon (Mannheim and Tedlock, 1995: 8ff.).

The dialogic quality of Christianity is present within formal debates among scholars and other religious elites, as much as it is in the everyday practices by which an individual attempts to live as a 'good Christian', or rejects this pursuit in favor of other life projects; it is present in the tensions and resonances that abide between different kinds of Christianity, as well as between Christianity and other forms of religious practice; it is there as individual Christians, churches, sects, denominations and so on move forward in relation to a particular understanding of the past; and it is there in moments of doubt and certainty that make up the biography of religious individuals and institutions. Amidst each of these and from them Christianity remains an emergent phenomenon, made and remade through moments of interaction and encounter, rather than a cultural object filled with a particular content.

Thus it is not just the form and content of such dialogic processes that is at stake, but the import and impact of such wider work on the self and its milieu. To put it in Asad's terms, it is not so much the 'coherence' of the practice that is of interest as it is the aspiration towards it, and the various trajectories on which this sets individuals and

groups in the formation of selves, the production of knowledges and the creation and/or motivation of populations. It was an attentiveness to precisely this kind of aspiration that led Weber to develop his famous thesis on the 'elective affinity' between the Protestant ethic and the 'spirit' of capitalism. It was only by looking at the anxieties over salvation that emerged in the wake of the Reformation, expressed in such everyday encounters as that between a pastor and a parishioner seeking pastoral care, that Weber was able to assert his claims.

In the next section we examine similar dialogic moments in existing work on Christianity. From these dialogic moments particular themes emerge. In what follows we outline three such themes: the place of the Bible, orality and literacy in establishing Christian authority and grounding Christian devotional practice; the tensions between the family, culture and the church community as competing sites of obligation and belonging; and the overlap between city, nation, and denomination as zones of citizenship.

### WHO IS A CHRISTIAN?

While we argue that it is methodologically innovative to focus on how Christians define what and who counts as (a) Christian amongst and in spite of themselves, examples of this conversation can be found in already published material. One example comes from Matthew Engelke's ethnographic study of textual authority and religious language in an African Christian church known as the Masowe weChishanu (2004). Amidst Engelke's analysis of the performative nature of Christian ritual language, he makes mention of an important tension amongst his Christian informants: 'The Masowe apostolics (as they are commonly known) will tell you that their prophets are suspect because the Masowe are "the Christians who don't read the Bible," a claim that strikes most Christians in Zimbabwe as nonsensical, even heretical' (Engelke, 2004: 76). Engelke explores these apparent tensions later in his article, lingering on his informants' question, *who is really a Christian?* Engelke writes:

As I mentioned above, nonapostolics in Zimbabwe may react to 'the Christians who don't read the Bible' with confusion, bemusement, or hostility. Many feel that rejection of the Bible threatens the very fabric of Christianity. Some religious leaders told me that the Masowe could not possibly be Christians. One Roman Catholic priest (a native Shona-speaker and a figure of some standing in the local community) told me that Masowe faith is primitive because its adherents have failed to grasp the importance of literacy. This kind of denigration does not only come from the so-called mission churches. The Maranke apostolics with whom I spoke viewed their Masowe brethren with playful condescension. A high-ranking official in another African independent church told me that the idea of claiming to be Christian and then refusing to allow the Bible at church services was unthinkable. 'What madness,' he said. (Engelke, 2004: 79)

The debate over who is a Christian in this particular African context signals a level of knowledge available to the ethnographer about how, when, and why certain people are considered Christian. It sheds light on the broader issue of the place of the Bible in Christian life and practice, a topic which in turn brings up questions regarding literacy,

textuality and authority as these are implicated in the proper expression of the divine will in word and world, as well as the human response to and understanding of that expression. As Engelke alludes, issues regarding colonialism and the missionary legacy are pertinent here, yet this is not the whole story. More important is a proper understanding of the place of the Bible in Christian life, the commonsense understanding of which only appears to have been challenged when this particular prophet claimed it was unnecessary, even an impediment to living a proper Christian life. Additional studies of the role of the Bible in Christian communities could no doubt be multiplied. As such, it signals a potent source of further exploration and debate.

Another example of debate over who is a Christian can be found in Robert Orsi's *Madonna of 115th Street* (1985) which explores popular religious devotion amongst Italian-American immigrants in East Harlem from 1880 to 1950. A small but identifiable part of his study is the debate that circulated amongst Italian, Irish, and German immigrants (as well as the Vatican) over the status of American Italian Catholicism at the turn of the century. Concerned with the Italian 'problem' (Orsi, 1985: 54), many asked: Were Italian-American immigrants really Catholic? Orsi reports:

Irish American Catholics could not understand Italian popular spirituality. In a bitter attack published in *The Catholic World* in 1888, the Reverend Bernard Lynch excoriated 'the peculiar kind of spiritual condition' of the Italian immigrants, fed on pilgrimages, shrines, holy cards, and 'devotions' but lacking any understanding of the 'great truths of religion'. (Orsi, 1985: 55)

This struggle, Orsi tells us, became manifest in the debates over whether Italian immigrants deserved a parish. Were these immigrants Catholic enough? Orsi quotes a Catholic priest from the early 20th century who argued that Italian immigrants were not:

[Father] Corrigan, into whose diocese both the immigrants and la Madonna were coming, contended that inasmuch as Italian immigrants did not ordinarily frequent the churches, that they tended to dwell in scattered clusters within the cities and normally made no offering to maintain parishes, they could hardly have their own parishes. (Orsi, 1985: 61)

That there exists disagreement amongst Catholics over who is (and who is not) a Catholic demonstrates an ongoing debate among Christians that contributes to the formulation of 'Christianity' as an object of study for anthropologists. It is this inter- and intra-communal struggle over the nature, bounds and logic of Christianity that signals a significant line of anthropological examination and that allows the ethnographer to understand not only Christianity's texture but also how the religion becomes thinkable in the first place amongst believers and non-believers alike.

To this point, Orsi demonstrates how his informants defined Christianity as well as what it meant to live as a Christian in Italian Harlem. Orsi writes: 'The plan was not necessarily to settle down [and stay in America]; rather, [Italian immigrants] wanted to make enough money to return and enable their kin to live as "Christians," the word they used to name their deepest aspiration' (Orsi, 1985: 18). Orsi later develops the

significance of 'their deepest aspirations'. Rooted in a woman's uneasiness about the moral frivolity that she found in the USA, Orsi reports one informant explaining:

'When [Italian immigrants] all grow up and are earning money and are married, we must buy or build a house which will hold our family together. That's the only way to live like Christians. The American way is no good at all for their children to do as they please and the parents don't care'. (Orsi, 1985: 87)

Living as a Christian for this community meant living as beholden to an Italian-American worldview that Orsi defines as the *domus*. Yet, what is of interest for the purposes of our study are not just the metrics used by, for example, Italian American immigrants or African Christian churches, but likewise the fact that a debate over what counts as Christian can be central to the life of every Christian community, and thus to the religion of Christianity as a whole. At issue in Orsi's example is the relation between local traditions and the universal claims of the church, on the one hand, and on the other, the delicate balance between the parish community and the families of which it is composed. Orsi's discussion implicitly draws attention to the lives of individual members felt to be in a position of having to negotiate their allegiances to family, the parish church and a recently gained reflexive awareness of culture, a relationship which became problematic when transferred from the Italian to the American context. Here again, examining this tripartite relationship across contexts suggests another in-road for the anthropology of Christianity as a comparative project.

This point can be made in the contemporary Guatemalan context as well. Here, debate within and among local Christian communities has long taken place amidst wider translocal conversations, starting with the early Catholic missions and continuing through to the neo-Pentecostal mega-churches of today. Indeed, contemporary debates center largely over differences between and among Catholic and evangelical forms of Christianity, particularly as the massive growth of the latter begins to pose a distinct challenge to the cultural and numerical hegemony long enjoyed by the former. With such dramatic changes in the religious landscape taking place, the question, who is a Christian?, has never seemed more relevant. And both local and translocal debates and conversations are largely centered on this topic.

This is certainly the case in contemporary evangelical missionary discourses, confirming Webb Keane's recent observation that: '[M]ost Christians surely claim at least some kind of commonality with other Christians, even if only far enough to assert that others have got it wrong and should know better' (Keane, 2007: 40). This Christian tendency to assert that 'others have got it wrong' and that others 'should know better' is alive and well within the Guatemalan context. One recent dissertation for a doctorate of ministry from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (USA) demonstrates this debate to a somewhat amusing extent.

In an opening chapter, Roger W. Grossmann explains that 'Guatemala has enjoyed an explosive numerical growth of evangelicals since the early 1960s' but that 'polling data' do 'not explain the nature and health of the church' (2002: 1–2). The church, Grossmann later announces, is unhealthy. In a sub-section entitled 'Crisis: Most Guatemalan Evangelicals are not Christian', Grossmann writes that 'Based upon statistical analysis . . . 36.3% of evangelicals have excellent Bible doctrine, 8.7% of

evangelicals have good Bible doctrine, 38.1% of evangelicals have poor Bible doctrine, 16.9% of evangelicals have non-Christian doctrine' (2002: 182). Grossmann concludes: 'In the race to evangelize and bring more into the fold, the Guatemalan church has done a poor job of producing disciples of Christ, not to mention making real Christians' (2002: 185). There are Christians in Guatemala, Grossmann essentially argues, but the quality of the Christianity is not what people once thought.

This anxiety over who is (and who is not) a Christian is not just a preoccupation of missionaries but is also felt amongst Guatemalans themselves, as the following ethnographic examples culled over the course of sustained fieldwork in Guatemala City's neo-Pentecostal mega-churches demonstrate. For example, Grossmann's concern over 'producing disciples of Christ' and 'real Christians' connects with one of the concerns shared by Guatemalan pastors. One neo-Pentecostal pastor explained: 'A disciple is distinct from a believer. A disciple is a person that is living the Gospel, still in the process of becoming [a disciple] with each word of God. This person is changing not only his heart, his soul, his mind, his way of thinking but also his attitude and eventually his deeds and actions as a person'. 'It takes a lot of work', the same pastor explained, 'to become a disciple. A lot of work: cell attendance, leadership classes, bible study, spiritual warfare, and so on'.

In question in Guatemala, as one might expect elsewhere, is not simply who is a Christian but the quality of one's Christianity. Thus, both the actual number of Christians and the quality of Christianity are a source of concern. The very same Guatemalan pastor just quoted later delivered a Sunday morning homily where he explained: 'In Korea today 38% of the people are born again [Christians]. I saw the other day that between the born again population and the charismatic Catholic population Guatemala is 40% [evangelical] believers. Who would have said that we would be 2% higher than [the Koreans]!?' And, during interviews, when pushed on the question of whether the country's Roman Catholic population might also count as 'Christian', another pastor explained: '[Roman Catholicism] is dogmatic . . . while a [evangelical] Christian mind is a mind that is equipped, coached, and informed'. This discourse competes with another – one that is demonstrated in this short but illustrative aside by a Roman Catholic priest in Guatemala: 'Everyone is free to articulate their spirituality however they choose. Who am I to say otherwise? But, there has to be something more to Christianity than [evangelical Christianity]'. The same priest later would add: 'The whole thing [evangelical Christianity] lacks a sense of history and tradition. Where is an historical understanding of the Gospel in their message? It seems that they just find passages from the Gospel to support what they want to say'.

The emotional complexities of this debate come to the fore, however, in small evangelical reflection groups known as 'cells'. These intimate spaces of belonging provide the ecclesiastical backbone for Guatemala City's mega-churches. Akin to prayer groups and Bible study groups, cells generate Christian fellowship as well as clarity over how Christianity relates to one's everyday life. The following ethnographic foray, then, provides another point of entry into the debate over who is (and who is not) a Christian.

Located in a city-center office building, 14 young professional residents of Guatemala City slowly work through the Spanish translation of Kay Arthur et al.'s (2001) *How Do You Know God's Your Father?*, a workbook that attempts to bring the insights of the Biblical book of John 1 to bear on the reader's everyday life, helping them to cultivate what it calls the 'lifestyle of genuine Christianity'. They meet weekly, using the workbook

as a foil for larger conversations over faith and fellowship. The book's back cover explains: 'There are two kingdoms in this world: God's and the devil's. There are two fathers and we belong either to one or to the other. So many say "I'm a Christian," but how can they really know God's their Father – and that heaven's home?' The back cover continues: 'The short book of 1 John was written for that purpose – that you might know that you really do have eternal life. This is a powerful, enlightening study that will take you out of the dark and open your understanding to this key biblical truth. Truth that will bring confidence, and the peace and joy that accompanies it, when you understand the lifestyle of genuine Christianity'.

The book is structured into six, 40-minute study sessions and contains activities and reflection questions. The readers are asked to answer short questions about the passages at hand, engage the text itself by circling particular words, such as 'love', and crossing out other words, such as 'hate'. This textual work then gives way to debate and conversation, prompted frequently by discussion questions. One such group discussion picked at the questions raised by the workbook's introduction. The introduction asks: 'What does a genuine Christian look like? Have you ever wondered? And what about you? Are you a Christian? Do you know you are going to heaven? Or can a person know for sure?' (Arthur et al., 2001: 1). The introduction continues: 'With eternity hanging in the balance, you need to know whether you stand with God. In other words, who's your father – God or the devil?' (2001: 2). Within the context of the cell group, late into the evening with members flagging after a long day of work, the book posed the following question: 'Do you know anyone who claims to be a Christian but walks in darkness as a habit of his or her life? What does 1 John 1:5–10 tell you about this person?' (Arthur et al., 2001: 9).

To provide some textual background, 1 John 1:5–10 reads: 'If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us'. The textbooks themselves provide the group's initial responses; it is common in the cell for everyone's initial response to discussion questions to come during quiet reflection and note taking. In the margins of one informant's book, two bullet points are scribbled. They read: 'The person is a liar. The person betrays God'. The notes in another informant's workbook read: 'Lies. Lies. Lies'. These notes were scribbled during the beginning of a 15-minute conversation that became, at times, heated but was otherwise playful and thoughtful. The group leader, at first, narrated his experience of a co-worker who claimed to be a Christian but who never went to church on Sunday. From the cell leader's perspective, his co-worker, at best, could be a believer but not a disciple. Another cell member reflected aloud about the supposed Christianity of her classmate. Once again, the classmate talked a great deal about being Christian but her works suggested otherwise: infrequent church attendance and no effort at participating in other church activities, such as cell groups. Both cell members playfully made quotation marks in the air with their fingers when describing the co-worker and classmate as Christian, signaling to layers of authenticity that are at play in the Guatemalan context in regards to one's Christianity. Yet, during the conversation there were many concessions made: yes, these people may be 'believers' but, no, they were not 'disciples'. Can one be a Christian if one is not a disciple? Can one be Christian if one does not do the things of a Christian? Don't Christians do more than just believe? The questions began to pile up. Cell members also drew from their own lives, placing their own Christianity under scrutiny: 'I think I'm a good Christian', one cell member testified, 'but I'm very busy and can only work on my own Christianity. I

can't help other people [with their faith]. Is that bad?' The group responded critically but comfortingly. No, it was not bad and, yes, she was a Christian.

The cell leader concluded this particular cell in much the same way that he concludes the other meetings, by repeating: 'I am the son of God' [*Yo soy el hijo de Dios*]. For the cell leader and for many of the cell members, the phrase reconfirms their intimate relationship with God as well as providing an opportunity for them to reflect on what it means to be a Christian. With eyes closed to a squint, these evangelical Christians repeat at their own pace: 'I am the son [or daughter] of God'.

From a dialogic perspective, the pronouns at play, both those stated and implied, are telling. It is possible to hear each individual cell member saying, at his or her own pace and in his or her own pitch: 'I [but maybe not you and maybe not you, also] am the son of God'. In the dialogical morass that is the evangelical cell group, the indexicality of prayer locates the individual believer as a Christian while also leaving unanswered whether others are (or are not) real Christians.

Identifying oneself as a real Christian in a place like Guatemala is keenly important. With an evangelical community that now constitutes as much as 60 percent of Guatemala's population (Pew Forum, 2006), congregations, such as those amassed by neo-Pentecostal mega-churches, produce a new language for national belonging and political participation that makes national and religious identities elide. Neo-Pentecostal mega-churches, with congregations as large as 25,000, have dozens of incorporated satellite churches throughout the Americas, from Bogotá to Boston. North of the Mexican–American border, these satellite churches minister to Guatemala's diaspora, forging an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) that confounds neat definitions of the nation-state. Participating in the debate over whether or not someone is a real Christian also means participating in whether or not someone is a real member of the Guatemalan nation-state, whether or not he or she lives within Guatemala's borders. The same elisions with the question '*who is a real Christian?*' can also be found across lines of gender (e.g. whether or not someone is a real man) and race and ethnicity (e.g. whether or not someone is really indigenous or not). The stakes, simply put, are high.

## CONCLUSION

What, then, is the effect of taking a dialogic approach to the anthropology of Christianity, of shifting the focus of analysis from the problems posed by Christianity to anthropology to the problems posed by Christianity to Christians themselves? We suggest that such a shift would first and foremost make the 'problematic' and 'impossible' qualities of Christianity a matter of analytic and ethnographic investigation, and not just of internal disciplinary critique. What makes Christianity a problem for anthropologists may differ in fundamental ways from what makes it a problem for Christians. Nevertheless, it is important to get a handle empirically on this problematic aspect and to make it the foundation of future analysis. To put it in simplistic terms, we can say that Robbins's initial question, 'what is a Christian?', is not limited in scope to the anthropology of Christianity. On the contrary, it is a question that Christians and non-Christians alike are constantly posing to one another and themselves. To this end, the anthropology of Christianity must recognize it has no monopoly on the question.

Future work in the anthropology of Christianity should place such debates at the center of their research. In this way, a viable and thoroughly comparative anthropology

of Christianity could be established that generates substantive insights while avoiding gross essentializations. In this article we have pointed to the fact that such debates exist and hold significant potential for the anthropology of Christianity. Furthermore, we have pointed to particular themes that emerge from such debates and the comparative potential they hold. In each case the question 'who is a Christian?' is the central one, animating discussions that try to make sense of the Christian life in a changing world. What remains to be done is to detail the understandings of Christians and Christianity that emerge from such debates. In this way, anthropologists may begin to generate an understanding of Christianity's wider socio-cultural significance, further establishing the anthropology of Christianity as a viable comparative project.

Finally, assuming a more dialogic approach resituates the relationship between anthropology and Christianity; from being a problematic relationship that inhibits work on Christianity, it becomes a site of problematization, where the tension between anthropological and Christian claims becomes a productive one, providing an epistemological entryway rather than a hurdle. Thus the ethnographic imperative becomes one of situating our own position as participant-observers amidst the conflicts, debates and other forms of dialogic interaction that constitute the Christian tradition. Such strategic positioning and the experiences that ensue become material from which to draw rich insight, rather than a hindrance to substantive work. Harding's (2000) analysis of Christian rhetoric is an exemplary example of such an approach and should remain a model for the future work in the anthropology of Christianity that is to come.

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### Notes

- 1 For a more thorough rendering of Bakhtin's notion of dialogue and its import for anthropology see Mannheim and Tedlock (1995); Silverstein (2004, 2006); and Bauman (2004).
- 2 We borrow this felicitous phrase from Scott without necessarily endorsing the wider project of which it is a part. While we would agree with Scott when he states 'If anthropologists want to study how Christianity introduces logical trajectories wherever people grapple with it, we must engage with the premises on their own terms', we would disagree with his suggestion that 'We need to master complex foundational doctrines so that our understandings of Christian thought are accurate and enable us to discern variations in ethnographic contexts' (Scott, 2005: 106). While a working understanding of Christianity is of course necessary, we would argue that the 'foundational doctrines' of which Scott speaks are only relatively so. More to the point, it is the 'variations in ethnographic contexts' as he terms them that continue to give rise to 'complex foundational doctrine' rather than the reverse.

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WILLIAM GARRIOTT is Assistant Professor in the Department of Justice Studies at James Madison University. He is a cultural anthropologist with interests in the anthropology of law, medicine, science and technology, and religion. His current research explores the impact of the methamphetamine epidemic on rural America. *Address*: Department of Justice Studies, MSC 1205, James Madison University, 800 S. Main Street, Harrisonburg, VA 22807, USA. [email: garriowc@jmu.edu]

KEVIN LEWIS O'NEILL is Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies and American Studies Program at Indiana University, Bloomington. His current research focuses on the relationship between Christianity and citizenship, especially at the intersection of neo-Pentecostalism and efforts at democratization in postwar Guatemala City. *Address*: Department of Religious Studies, Sycamore Hall, 205 Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405–2601, USA. [email: kloneill@indiana.edu]

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