This is an essay about encounters among anthropology, theology, and to a lesser extent philosophy, in the understanding of Christianity. As an anthropologist, I’m concerned with how such interactions might have an impact on my discipline. Despite some fundamental differences in aims and methods among these academic approaches, there are also some intriguing ways in which current theological work asks troubling if pertinent questions of contemporary anthropology—questions whose salience has been enhanced by the emergence of both “global Christianity” and an associated anthropology of Christianity. Key issues relate to the problematic nature of both the social and the temporal in anthropological discourse, the genealogical connections between anthropological and theological concepts, and the politics of our attempts to assess the significance of religion as a force for continuity or rupture in relation to the cultural and social circumstances that we study.

My argument here rests on a division between broadly “performative” and “prophetic” forms of theology and/or theologically inflected discourse.
In my view, performative theology comes close to anthropology in its aims and assumptions but as a result does not challenge anthropological practices to any great degree. Prophetic approaches seem deeply flawed from a social science and ethnographical standpoint, and yet, despite everything, they also point to some troubling aspects of the anthropology of religion that we need to address, even as we re-emphasize and reconfigure a discipline that is radically immanent in its approach.

I want to begin by discussing two debates—two encounters—between certain forms of theology and certain forms of secular materialist ways of discussing religion. One debate occurred in the summer of 2009, when I attended a two-day workshop (Thirty Years of the Anthropology of Islam) at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), in London.1 I had been invited to comment on the conference as an outsider, an ethnographer of Christianity who might be able to reflect on the links and contrasts between the “anthropologies” of the two religions. Indeed, as the papers proceeded, I felt something of a neophyte, not only because my area of specialization lies elsewhere but also because of the long history of the anthropology of Islam as a self-conscious project, in contrast to the relative novelty of the current interest in Christianity as a discrete area of study.2

Here, I want to highlight two dimensions of the SOAS conference. The first was the lack of soul-searching over how to define or encompass Islam. Such an absence contrasts with recent concerns about how anthropologists have identified the salient features of the anthropology of Christianity, which have involved charges of idealism and largely ignoring Orthodox Christianity and other “mainstream” Western forms.3 An early attempt to summarize the anthropology of Islam by Abdul Hamid El-Zein contrasts anthropological and theological positions; he concludes that Islam as an analytical category is deeply problematic.4 Three decades after El-Zein’s piece was published, Islam was clearly embedded in a series of long-running conversations at SOAS, serving less as an autonomous category for analysis and more as a fertile catalyst for discussing textuality, mediation, authority, gender, revelation, and so on.

The second dimension involved a self-conscious if brief rapprochement between anthropology and a certain type of theology. Caroline and Filippo Osella’s discussion of Muslim debates over shirk (the sin of polytheism) in South India not only demonstrated the importance of everyday discussions within the ulema in the production and dissemination of theological standpoints but also deployed reflections on Christian theology and associated linguistic philosophy to comment on such Muslim practice.5 It might seem
that their approach involved a double displacement of anthropology and Islam, respectively, and yet arguably they took such a position in order to focus more precisely on practices surrounding and constituting the debates they witnessed. Referring to Judith Butler’s influence on “performative theologians” such as Catholic theologian Nicholas Lash, the Osellas argued for the role of such theology not in uncovering but in making religious meaning—one that could therefore be understood as contextualized (immanent, even) within a given social framework.

A significant feature of such an argument is that performative meaning cannot be defined abstractly, while practices that subvert prevailing norms involve forms of resignification through performance. Another is that the idea of religion as an isolable “category,” divorced from a social framework, must be approached with caution by the analyst, if not necessarily by informants. The Osellas drew, for instance, on an interview with Lash in which he says, “The view that ‘religion’ is the name of one particular district which we may inhabit if we feel so inclined, a region of diminishing plausibility and significance, a territory quite distinct from those we know as ‘politics’ and ‘art,’ as ‘science’ and ‘law’ and ‘economics’; this view of things, peculiar to modern Western culture, had a beginning, in the 17th century, and . . . is now coming to an end.” If such a view sounds familiar, we might note that a version of it appears in, among other places, Talal Asad’s “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,” which argues that conceptions of religion as a generalized and universal phenomenon, isolated from politics, themselves emerged from a unique Western post-Reformation history. Thus, a theology that depends on a notion of religion that is set apart is presented as being anachronistic: both a response, one might argue, to discourses of the secular and a capitulation to them, in the sense that spiritual purity is valorized at a cost to both general plausibility and influence.

Let me now juxtapose my experience at SOAS with another encounter, though not one I witnessed. I refer here to The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic? in which neo-Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek and Anglo-Catholic theologian John Milbank engage each other’s views, as well as a review of (one might say, a further encounter with) that book by philosopher and theologian John D. Caputo. Interestingly, Caputo sees Žižek and Milbank’s work as a sign of an intellectually hybridizing “theological turn” among European intellectuals,” who appear to be using theology to address “basic questions in ontology and political theory.”

In one corner, Milbank pits himself against the “ontology of violence,”
which he regards as permeating modern political, social, and economic theory. He proposes instead a theology in which, according to Caputo, the “material world is seen to reflect the goodness and glory of God” and, most significantly, one whose ontology is based on “primordial peace and reconciliation,” made possible in part through “a metaphysics of analogy.” The latter involves a position from which we can look up from the oppositions and conflicts of life to a realm where such opposition is shown “to have a point of coincidence in the subsistent being of God.” As Caputo presents it, “the metaphysics of such an analogy supports a rhetoric of paradox.” Such a metaphysics also builds on Milbank’s classic *Theology and Social Theory*, an extended attempt to reach “beyond secular reason” (as the subtitle states) and to remove what Milbank sees as the pathos and false humility of contemporary theology.¹¹ Both political and liberation theology are accused of presenting a self-defeating division, implying, “Insofar as salvation is ‘religious,’ it is formal, transcendental and private; insofar as it is ‘social,’ it is secular” (*Theology*, 245). In contrast, Milbank calls for a strongly ecclesiological perspective in which salvation is at once religious and public, reliant on “the ultimacy of a particular historical practice” (ibid., 246). What he sees as the counterontology of Christianity should involve “the metanarrative of a counter-historical interruption of history” (ibid., 422–23). Ultimately, this version of Christianity suggests a stance such that “peace no longer depends upon the reduction to the self-identical, but is the *sociality* of harmonious difference” (ibid., 4), while Christianity indeed becomes “the coding of transcendental difference as peace” (ibid., 6).

At the same time, Milbank accepts the need to set out a theology aware of itself as culturally constructed. No claim is made to represent an objective social reality; instead, the social knowledge advocated is a continuation of what is seen as ecclesial practice, the imagination in action of a reconciled social order.¹² This admission is not meant to diminish from the power of the paradox that he advocates. In other words, “it is . . . important to reassert theology as a master discourse; theology, alone, remains the discourse of non-mastery” (*Theology*, 6).

In response to these kinds of arguments, at least as they are unfolded in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, Žižek treats Milbank’s ontology as a misguided reinvocation of an imagined prelapsarian age. Yet, as Caputo puts it, he seems to argue nonetheless for the importance of a kind of “fantasy” in prompting collective action. Thus Saint Paul is a significant touchstone for Žižek in his promulgation of a model of conversion that can provide the
very paradigm of the constitution of the militant, revolutionary subject. Here again, we see roots in earlier work. Žižek’s On Belief draws parallels between Lenin and Paul, in that both can be seen to have universalized a particular theory (Marxism and Christianity, respectively) by tearing it from its original context. In On Belief, Žižek also explores Alain Badiou’s discussion of the event of truth and “the gap that forever separates history (in the sense of a simple dynamic evolutionary unfolding) from historicity proper whose site is none other than the very tension between Eternity and History, the unique moments of their short-circuiting.” Exploring the logic of this position, Žižek argues that history in a radical sense of the term is nothing but a succession of ruptures between before and after. Thus, advocates of the “end of history” such as Francis Fukuyama can be seen as closer to true historicity than those who insist that history goes on. Nonetheless, in The Puppet and the Dwarf, Žižek combines an assertion of the continuity and persistence of Christianity over time with a central claim that Christian theology can act as a puppetlike resource for the dwarf of Marxism to achieve its secular ends.

Caputo’s personal verdict on the Žižek-Milbank debate is, “It is hard to resist a desire to put a pox on both their houses.” He objects to both the “ironic materialism of Milbank and the ironic religion of Žižek,” the sense in which both scholars deploy the language of the other’s discipline with somewhat mischievous intent, in order to appropriate its rhetoric. This is complemented by a concern over what we might call the narrative framing used by both scholars. Thus Caputo asks, “Why do we need the notion that at the metaphysical base of things there lies either a primordial peace or a primordial violence—or a primordial anything, at least one that we could ever get our hands on?” In response, he argues: “Do we have to believe that something deep is out there but alas it is lost and we are hopelessly searching for it? That is repetition as reproduction. Why not rather say that by searching for it, it is there, produced by the repetition? The repetition is generative.” Note the resonance here with what I have described as a performative approach, where the focus is on the self-constituting dimension of “lived” theological discourse.

My description of these two encounters, the SOAS conference and Žižek-Milbank-Caputo, is meant, of course, to create a third encounter, which emerges out of the juxtaposition of these two debates and contains (at least) two kinds of theology and (at least) two secular-materialist approaches to religion. But we also discern two broad and admittedly crudely sketched orien-
tations as to how to engage with and analyze religion. In the so-called SOAS view, religion as category or catalyst seems to remain up for grabs, emergent from and immanent within a potentially unstable relation between scholar and informant. Lived theology itself is seen as both embedded in a fieldwork context (such as the debates over *shirk*) but also able to frame the interpretation of the analyst, who attempts as far as possible to work through the categories of informants. In these terms, the separation of religion from the everyday politics of the social order is *itself* seen as a problematic (and often Western-inflected) political act, whether it involves Saint Paul as the embodiment of a timeless model or Christianity as a container of the exceptional ontology of peace. A parallel point has been well made by Gil Anidjar in his gloss on Asad’s work, where he notes that the inherently “polemical” concept of religion can itself be seen as performative, a political category that can act as a form of intervention in the context of larger social orders, even as it invites—entices—us to separate it from the domain of power.\(^\text{18}\) We are brought back to earth but also to a particular view of temporality: we examine the past of a religion such as Christianity to appreciate its contingencies but also its ever-present links to systems of authority and governmentality—systems that are just as evident today as Christianity is “performed” by clergy, theologians, anthropologists, and various informants in the present.

The approach in *The Monstrosity of Christ* is rather different. Milbank and Žižek might revel in their ideological oppositions, but both can be seen as combining analysis with an orientation to an imagined future, toward which the radical or revolutionary reader is directed. Both authors create a certain distance from particular constructions of the social. Thus, as Nina Power puts it, they are “united in their abhorrence of contemporary life,” leading to the politically motivated deployment of “theology as a resource for thinking differently about the world.”\(^\text{19}\) Milbank’s case is buttressed by his construction and condemnation of a particular ontology of the social sciences that he locates in the work of both anthropologists and sociologists, before providing a vision of an alternative ontology that is required if theology is to find its proper voice. In Žižek’s case, the figure of Paul acts not as a *deus* but as a *sanctus ex machina*, inviting us to adopt an alternative model of social and political order. His deployment of Paul differs from that of philosophical colleagues such as Giorgio Agamben and Badiou, but the sense of an alternative temporality and sociality is evident in all their works. Thus for Agamben the Pauline notion of the messianic is an incor-
poration of parousia into historical, chronological time and may lead to the possibility of the neutralization of divisions of law and social distinctions. The ideal promise and gift of grace under such conditions provide no foundations for exchange and social obligations, unlike the relative form of grace promulgated by the historical church, which links faith to rules of conduct and an economy of exchange. Indeed, the very dialectic between spiritual and worldly powers, between anomic experience of grace and experience of the law, is necessary. Badiou’s project, meanwhile, is ultimately concerned not with everyday actions but with extraordinary decisions that precisely “isolate an actor from context,” resulting in a kind of disruptive abnormality.

In contrast to the seeming immanence of much of the debate at SOAS, there is a subjunctive, almost prophetic quality evident in these respective theological and philosophical standpoints. The authors invite us to see how the world might appear if we choose to look through a certain frame that takes us away from the distractions of the present. Despite their differences, Žižek and Milbank seem to agree on the basic message of religion: humans require an “otherness” that involves the pairing of transformations in temporality and sociality in this reframing process. In Milbank’s case, the irenic surely becomes somewhat ironic as his expressions of paradox deny an ontology of power but are themselves the assertion of a certain kind of mastery, a metadiscourse that is beyond our grasp but for which we must strive, toward which we must direct our upturned gaze. Paradox is not being observed here; it is being deployed as a political and epistemological strategy. In a book on radical orthodoxy with Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock, Milbank makes the political project more evident, as he explores—in opposition to the ways in which secularism has been defining the world (“soulless, aggressive, nonchalant and nihilistic”)—the “rational possibility of an indeterminacy that is not impersonal chaos but infinite interpersonal harmonious order, in which time participates.”

As Joel Robbins has pointed out, theology, unlike our normal vision of anthropology, is a “committed” discipline in its very constitution, so that the two have different ultimate goals. Milbank’s Radical Orthodoxy can deploy a powerful image of otherness, which anthropologists would have difficulty in conveying. We are indeed ill equipped and mostly would not wish to adopt the Christian mythos that underlies what I am presenting as Milbank’s irenic/ironic theology. To the extent that Žižek’s left-leaning Paul also presents a mythos, albeit in religious-turned-secular revolution-
ary form, Žižek also distinguishes himself from the pragmatic anthropology and performative theology evident at SOAS. My general sympathies, perhaps, are clear. And yet, that is not quite the whole story of the encounters I have been describing. What are we to make of the immanence, contextualism, and performativity that belong to a rapprochement between an anthropological standpoint and a certain theological one? As Asad points out in a comment on Ernest Gellner’s work, claims for contextualism—just as much as those for universalism—must be seen as particular forms of social practice, whose assumptions must also be laid bare. Arguably, it is all too easy for anthropology to endorse a notion of performative theology, emphasizing embedded, processual concept-formation, but might the prophetic model at least give us pause? Milbank and Žižek provide some hints, some intimations for an anthropology and not just a theology (radical or revolutionary) of religion, in part because of the resonances between their approaches and some of the dilemmas and opportunities provided by the new anthropology of global Christianity. It is to the latter that I now turn, before coming back to a juxtaposition—a new encounter—between the two.

The Provocations of (Global) Christianity

When I first carried out fieldwork on charismatics in Sweden in the 1980s, many colleagues remarked that they had encountered similar Christians in their own fields in various parts of the world but had usually chosen to ignore (if not abhor) them as peripheral to their interests as anthropologists. Arguably, this experience in the field was a sign of things to come: both the demographic explosion of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity that has marked much of the ethnographic study of religion in recent decades, and the trouble anthropology has had in coming to terms with Christianity as an object of study. The reasons for such ambivalence toward researching this particular religion are legion. At the most obvious level, Robbins refers to the importance of competition in the field, the likely struggles between anthropological and missionary purposes located around ambiguous boundaries of purpose and ideology: “Neither real others nor real comrades, 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.”

The troubling nature of boundaries is also evident in discussions over the
genealogical connections between Christian and anthropological concepts. Fenella Cannell refers to the functioning of Christianity as “‘the repressed’ of anthropology” over the period of the formation of the discipline and thus to its role as “a religion whose very proximity has hitherto rendered it only imperfectly perceptible.” This proximity contains its own ironies, for instance in Cannell’s comments on the ways in which Maurice Bloch’s Marxist theory of ritual arguably implies a notion of transcendent truth that is deeply Christian, thus exemplifying a “long tradition of antireligious social science that incorporates Christian models by its refusal of them.”

In recent decades, also, the history of the concept of belief has come into view, expressed in Malcolm Ruel’s examination of “the monumental peculiarity of Christian ‘belief,’” Asad’s critique of the Protestant implications of Geertz’s discussions of religion, and Robbins’s discussion of the ways in which much ethnographic description has relied on a conversion of propositional accounts of belief into the third person, so that the X are said to “believe” this or that, with such beliefs not only distinguishing “them” from “us” but also somehow constituting the core of “their” culture.

The way in which the anthropology of Christianity has, in practice, emerged as a set of discussions over some of the currently most expansive forms of Christianity (i.e., evangelicalism and, especially, forms of Pentecostalism) reinforces some of these concerns. Chris Hann argues that the terms of the debate have indeed been too dominated by an agenda that has not only excluded certain varieties of Christianity but also prevented us from engaging in more problem-oriented comparative questions that can take in other world religions. The emphases in the new focus on Pentecostalism explain its significance as an object of study and also, perhaps, indicate its limitations as a synecdoche for Christianity as a whole. Arguably, an older rejection of Protestant missions as a sign of “disturbing” modernity has now been replaced by an examination of these missions as a sign of and response to forms of modernity, cultural change, and globalization (as well as resistance to or negotiation with each of these processes). From having been “repressed,” such Christianity has become at times a highly privileged site for the exploration of anthropology’s own rupture from, or renegotiation with, notions of the local and the traditional. Indeed, perhaps the privilege has become something of an overprivilege. Cannell argues, “It may be that the history of modernity is inextricably bound up with the history of Christianity, but this does not mean that the meaning of Christianity is sufficiently explained by the history of modernity.” Her stance
is also part of a wider argument that challenges the preoccupation with the transcendent/immanent and argues instead for a fundamental concern with incarnation as “central” to Christianity—including the Mormonism that she herself studies.

Such temporal rupture is, of course, complemented by what appear to be novel forms of spatial continuity, encapsulated in the image not merely of a “world” religion (a much older concept) but of one that is self-consciously globalizing. These spatial developments raise questions concerning the relevant location and points of reference for contemporary religious forms but also bring up key issues for anthropologists of how to deal with forms of cultural continuity and global consciousness. Thus José Casanova argues that while “Western Christendom was the first civilization to be territorialized into nation-states,” “globalization facilitates the return of the . . . world religions” as more diffuse “imagined communities, overlapping and at times in competition with the imagined national communities.”35 While “the transformation of contemporary Catholicism illustrates the opportunities which the process of globalization offers to a transnational religious regime with a highly centralized structure,” “Pentecostalism may serve to illustrate the equally favorable opportunities” available to “a highly decentralized religion.”36 Indeed, Casanova predicts that Pentecostalism is likely to become the predominant global form of Christianity in the twenty-first century. Robbins suggests some of the reasons why this might be the case, arguing that although elements of discontinuity are by definition emphasized in all conversionist religions, Pentecostalism maintains particular ways of expressing discontinuity that not only allow it to articulate with and appropriate local cultural forms but can themselves be seen as part of its distinctive globalizing form.37

Given the traditional anthropological reflex of rooting supposedly holistic culture in a fixed place, Pentecostalism and charismatic Christianity, at least in their self-consciously globalizing manifestations, seem to constitute what one might call “part-cultures,” presenting worldviews meant for export that are holistic in one sense but, as we have seen, also in tension with the values of any given host society. How, then, might such a part-culture be described? Here I want to juxtapose theological and anthropological approaches once more. Harvey Cox’s magisterial Fire from Heaven is a kind of transnational religious journey, tracing forms of the faith around the world and beginning and ending in churches near his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Thus he notes: “I gradually became convinced that
if I could somehow decipher pentecostalism’s inner meaning and discern the source of its enormous appeal, this would provide an essential clue to understanding the larger religious upsurge of which it is a part.” Cox asks why has religion (especially this kind of religion) returned? Here, then, he describes Seymour’s influence on events in Los Angeles:

At Azusa Street, a kind of primal spirituality that had been all but suffocated by centuries of western Christian moralism and rationality reemerged with explosive power. Along with primal speech, this newfound spirituality became the second key feature of the revival. This resurfacing of archetypal modes of worship, elements that lie close to the surface in some cultures but are buried more deeply in others, helps explain why the movement raced across the planet with such electrifying speed. Its potent combination of biblical imagery and ecstatic worship unlocked existing, but often repressed religious patterns, enabling pentecostalism to root itself in almost any culture. (Fire, 101)

In such a view, Pentecostalism resonates with but also catalyzes—unlocks—a form of spirituality inherent in an aspect of the human condition that seems somehow primary, prerational. To put it in the language of psychoanalysis implicit in Cox’s words, it becomes a form of faith that uncovers hidden or repressed archetypes that are already there. Globalization of the faith becomes as much rediscovery as diffusion of spirituality. Such an argument is built into the recursive structure of the journey that forms the basis of the book: Cox finishes his work by visiting a group called the Azusa Christian Community (in Dorchester, rather than in Los Angeles) bringing him “full circle.” He notes, “Never had I felt closer to the original spirit of Azusa Street than when I visited its namesake, in a rented hall forty minutes from my doorstep” (ibid., 321).

As a theologian, Cox is perhaps likely to assume the possibility of discovering a common, elemental faith in humanity—the basis of what he calls the homo religiosus (ibid., 83). He sees different ecstatic forms as having ontological as well as semiotic parallels. We might see this approach as very different from that of anthropology. Yet Robbins points out that despite their claims of cultural relativism, many anthropologists actually produce forms of explanation rather similar to Cox’s when they assert that Pentecostalism is proving to be attractive around the world because it embraces and reinforces “enchanted” and “ecstatic” religious forms very much like those
of local cultures. Rather than ignoring Pentecostalism and concentrating on “authentic” culture, this approach assimilates the incoming religion to such culture by seeing it as repackaging the ecstatic experiences that are already present. The power and continuity of local cultural frameworks can thus be asserted in the face of homogenizing modernity. Ironically, such a view also runs the danger of assuming that a universal mode of ecstatic experience exists, which can simply be dressed up in different religious garments. Cox’s theological assumption of the universal ontology of the primal in the face of rationality is paralleled by an ethnographic assertion of the inherent powers of the local in the face of the global/(post)modern. With this sense that theology and anthropology may have some parallels that prompt further analysis and questioning, I turn to the extent to which global Christianity and “prophetic” theological discourses may have points of articulation, albeit not agreement.

**Articulations, Provocations, Disjunctions**

We have seen that anthropologists have explored religious revival across the globe, tracing a new religio-political landscape in which voices—and often migrants—from the global South are making themselves increasingly heard, whereas the concerns of a book such as *Theology and Social Theory* emerge more clearly from a Euro-American intellectual tradition and have little to say directly relating to Pentecostalism or evangelicalism in general. However, both can be seen to respond to the reemergence of religion in the public sphere alongside continued debates as to whether religion itself can be seen as an autonomous realm of aspiration and practice. Both point, albeit in very different ways, to three dilemmas that face a contemporary anthropology of Christianity, even contemporary anthropology as a whole.

**Theology and Anthropology: Genealogies and Appropriations**

Neither Milbank’s attempt to expose the conjunctions between social scientific and theological discourse before asserting the need for a definitive disjunction nor Žižek’s attempt to deploy theological discourse as an act of intellectual colonization is adequate for anthropology. The performative approach, however, at least as discussed here, appropriates a particular theological discourse precisely because it corresponds so well with already existing assumptions about the workings of power in the making of “meaning.”
The history of anthropology may contain moves toward creating disjunctions from theological discourse, but it is clear that much has been repressed rather than removed. Different interpretations of and approaches to a notion of “rupture” index the goals and ambivalences of the different approaches explored in this paper, indicating points of common concern as well as disjunction. As Cannell points out, the notion can itself be interpreted as a coming together of Christian representations of time and secular concerns with the “break” afforded by modernity. Milbank’s radical and Žižek’s revolutionary ruptures indicate their respective idealized breaks within a (post)modern era, but discontinuity is met by a much more ambiguous response from the anthropology of global Christianity, which expresses deep ambivalences over the relationship between notions of the modern and the nonmodern, the global and the local, and uncertainty over the extent to which transformations in the religious sphere will of necessity have an impact on the rest of society. As Robbins points out, the assertion and assumption of cultural continuity in the ethnographic analysis of the impact of globalizing Christianity in local (spatially defined) contexts is a kind of primordialism. However, we might also assert with Hann that the attempt to characterize Christianity in terms of ideological limits, as fundamentally about, say, transcendence/immanence or incarnation, creates its own fetishized categories, which function to assert their own kind of continuity over time and space.

I do not attempt to present a solution to such dilemmas, but I make two observations. First, these debates remind us to distinguish between Christianity per se and the anthropology of Christianity. The latter is inevitably a shifting, framing device, which reveals the concerns of anthropology as much as, if not more than, Christianity. If we apply to it a kind of ethnographic holism, the assumption that it must encompass all of Christianity or some putative fundamental features of Christianity, then it runs the risk of resurrecting afresh the idea of an encapsulated, autonomous religious phenomenon. Indeed, to accuse the anthropology of Christianity of not covering the entire religion reveals the assumption that such a goal is attainable. This point takes us back, then, to the pragmatism of the discussion of Islam at SOAS.

My second observation is more speculative and returns us to genealogies. The proposition that much anthropological discourse has Christian roots is undeniable. However, it is not the only possible genealogy to trace, and it is not merely Christianity that is undergoing globalizing processes—
so is anthropology as a discipline. We might argue that without some of the intellectual roots discussed here, the anthropology of religion as we know it will cease to exist. Or we can imagine an anthropology emergent from institutional and intellectual frameworks in which Christianity is not always a salient influence for significant theoretical frameworks. Here, the transformations may involve evolution rather than rupture and be less a result of consciously motivated change than a product of shifting circumstances of intellectual production.

(Re)Framing the Social
Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory* argues powerfully for doubting the very idea of there being something “social” to which religious behavior could be referred. His fundamental point is that the terms *social* and *society* have so insinuated themselves that we never question the assumption that while “religions” are problematic, “the social” is obvious (*Theology*, 101–2). The appropriation of Saint Paul as a model by Žižek and his philosophical colleagues, meanwhile, indicates the possibility of the destruction or bypassing of current social orders and temporalities. In contrast, a performative and embedded approach indicates the difficulties of escaping the discursive and material frames of present social arrangements and the necessity for an analytical approach that itself is grounded in context.

As with the notion of rupture, these theological and philosophical approaches highlight a key ambiguity for contemporary anthropology—one that is indeed central to debates within the anthropology of Christianity—even if they do not in themselves provide a convincing or useful way forward. Debates over global Christianity can be seen as a type case of what Roy Dilley calls the problem of context—a notion of context that includes but is not exhausted by the social. As Dilley notes, ethnographic interpretation is itself a particular way in which to manufacture connections and disconnections, so that a “context or frame also creates a disjunction between the object of interest and its surroundings.” Problematizing the framing of social context in this way leads to a variety of potential responses. My aim here is not to choose any one approach but to indicate that an anthropology of global Christianity is a powerful, if problematic, framing device that highlights the contingent nature of our choices of object and scale of analysis—as indicated by Hann’s complaints about the restrictive character of the currently existing discourse. Ironically, seeing the study of global Christianity in this way arguably takes us at least one step closer to the
subjunctive character of both Milbank’s and Žižek’s approaches. We are not seeking to observe the current social order through the frame of a self-consciously ideal model, but we are knowingly choosing the frame through which to observe “performances” of religion: indeed, the performance is of necessity partially constituted by the frame.

A Committed Anthropology?
In his examination of the “awkward” relationship between anthropology and theology, Robbins notes that anthropologists find it relatively easy to convince others that different ways of conceiving life actually exist, but they find it much harder to present a critical agenda whereby they can show how such knowledge can make a difference to their readers’ lives.48 In contrast, he says, theologians find it hard to “prove lived differences” but gain considerable critical force since their readers are committed to the notion that certain differences might indeed transform their lives. He uses Milbank’s Theology and Social Theory to illustrate the production of a powerful alternative ontology oriented toward “what social life should normatively be like.”49 We might also note Lash’s own stated commitment from a rather more “immanent” theological viewpoint to “the duty laid upon all human-kind to work for peace, and justice, and the integrity of God’s creation.”50

Anthropology has a long and important history as a discipline committed to social reform, in particular, to delimited fields of action. However, as Robbins implies, its current ability to suggest—or even to make others aware of—more revolutionary ways of thinking about social ontologies is not being demonstrated to the degree that it might. In a recent paper (drawing on Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, among others), Robbins proposes that anthropologists might engage in their own forms of “messianism”—the deployment and dissemination of ethnography as creating encounters with an otherness that is not predefined.51 Indeed, he suggests that we have our own partial models from the past: not Saint Paul but figures such as Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, with their history of making reports of otherness effective at home.

An anthropology of global Christianity can at least help to provide a potential platform for an anthropology committed to addressing a wider and different kind of public. One reason is that the study of globalizing anthropology, for some anthropologists, at least, also implies a study of an anthropology of home, as evangelizing Christians work within fields that refuse to stay out there. Furthermore, the scale and ambition of some of
our informants—their own appeals to publics that transcend specific localities—may create new audiences for our own work. It is true that some emergent Pentecostal movements appear to be quiescent in their attitude to politics and wider cultural spheres, but the point does not apply to all. In my own work in Sweden, I found that a study of an apparently obscure ministry on the edge of Uppsala created a national moral panic that also took on international dimensions, as politicians, theologians, and journalists sought to frame the activities of the ministry in terms of transnational trends in conservative Christianity.52

There is again a wider, more speculative point to be made here. As a “committed” discipline, Radical Orthodoxy emerges not only from an academic basis but also with reference to a much wider set of institutional structures, forms of ritual engagement, and everyday modes of (religious) praxis. Anthropology cannot have such coverage. Yet, the discipline’s general refusal to contemplate its potential effects on its practitioners beyond the academy is astonishing in a discipline committed to studies of the everyday.53 In practice, we simply do not know whether the critical agenda of anthropology has made a difference to anybody’s life because we have not looked very hard. It may be that the practitioners of a global Christianity will force our hands in ways we do not expect. For years, I have been struck by the attempts of the ministry in Uppsala to teach anthropology in its own university, as part of the development of a globalizing missionary practice.54 In 2009, I concluded an interview with a young member of a Nigerian church in London and experienced a reversal of roles, as the young man quizzed me over which were the best places for him to do an anthropology degree, precisely in order to further his calling as a journalist within the church.55 Others can see the potential for anthropology to articulate with such everyday praxis, even if we cannot.

Concluding Remarks

It is tempting to end with some choice words of Paul: “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”56 We might easily substitute anthropology for philosophy here in order to make the saint’s remark even more pointed. However, this has been an “apologetics” for an anthropology—and especially a global anthropology of Christianity—that lacks prophetic rhetoric, to be sure, accepts the contingencies of its intellec-
tual frames, and yet emphasizes the power of an “immanent” understanding of religious performances. In my argument, it is our very engagement with the immanent that gives us the opportunity to explore forms of otherness that can be “eventful” in the lives of readers, students, and fellow practitioners. We thus engage with the world as it demonstrably is or has been (as well as what it might be), rather than with the seductions and reductions of paradoxes that, in practice, take us away from realizable social realms. Such understandings are indeed aimed at locating a globalizing faith exclusively within the “rudiments” of the world: that, after all, is the limit and the power of anthropological ambition.

Notes

Many thanks to Matthew Engelke, Joel Robbins, and Michael Hardt for their astute comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

5 Caroline and Filippo Osella, “Debating Shirk: The Importance of the Everyday in Producing Theological Standpoints” (talk given at the Thirty Years of the Anthropology of Islam conference).
6 See, for example, Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
7 Though the extent to which “meaning” is itself a Christian concept can be debated.

11 John Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); hereafter cited in the text parenthetically by page number as Theology.

12 Interestingly, at times in his writings and interviews, Milbank comes close to advocating something like an ideal version of gift relations in his depiction of this social order.


14 Ibid., 112.


17 “Milbank and the authors who swim around him in the ‘school’ of ‘Radical Orthodoxy’ flatter themselves with the insufferable conceit that the entire world may be divided into either medieval Thomistic metaphysicians—or nihilists!” Caputo, review. Caputo’s stated preference is for ambience and ambiguity rather than either absolute contradiction or absolute peace.


23 Ibid., 292. Arguably Victor Turner’s well-known adaptation of elements of the rite of passage motif to develop the notion of communitas has echoes of the Christian mythos, combining a Roman Catholic sensibility with anthropological analysis.

In this regard, the emergence of the anthropology of (global) Christianity should not be seen as an exceptional development in the discipline, rather as a fertile means through which to understand the causes and expressions of an anthropology that is being transformed and, I would argue, can itself transform others.


Hann, “Anthropology of Christianity per se.”


Ibid., 434.

Joel Robbins, “The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 117–43. 128. These ways involve the following: the ritualization of discontinuity; the maintenance of discontinuity through an “ascetic code embedded” (ibid., 127) in dualistic schemes; the preservation of cultural elements that are simultaneously being broken from; and a dualism expressed through “a flexible language of satanic influence” (ibid.) that “allows locally meaningful idioms for talking about the past and current social problems” (ibid., 129) to be retained and that facilitates the transformation of the significance of such idioms.


See also Robbins, “The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity,” 126.
Ibid.

See also Robbins, “What Is a Christian?”

In tracing the genealogies of the relationship, we also need to avoid a kind of etymological primordialism that assumes the necessary stability of the meaning of terms over time.

Cannell, Anthropology of Christianity.

Robbins, “Continuity Thinking.”

Hann, “Anthropology of Christianity per se.”

Dilley, Problem of Context, 2. Dilley points interestingly to Alessandro Duranti and Charles Goodwin’s discussion of “problems of context in relation to linguistics, pragmatics, and the ethnography of speaking and performance” (ibid.: xi). See Alessandro Duranti and Charles Goodwin, eds., Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). The argument is that “the concept of context has been progressively transformed through its movement back and forth between linguistics and social anthropology” (ibid.).

For instance, Dilley writes of the Derridean attack on a naïve Austinian approach to performativity that uses the “speaker’s intention as a means of controlling or arresting the infinite regress in the process of contextualization” (ibid., 22). Or there is Fardon’s examination of the ways that “shifts in context or frame suggest new perspectives for the generation of knowledge,” as for instance we might shift the figure and ground relationship between what we decide is the “local” and the “global” (ibid., 32). Or again, Strathern’s Partial Connections explores the consequences of an absence of a totalizing concept of culture: “‘partial’ contexts in the form of partial connections wherein different frames or ‘scales’ are adopted to generate competing orders of knowledge that each make some ‘sense’ of social life” (ibid.). Or we might go further still in a Latourian attempt to “reassemble” the social and disrupt both its stability and its conventional powers as an explanatory force.


Ibid., 289.

“Performing Scripture.”


Coleman, Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity, 86.


Coleman, Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity.

This is not to imply, however, that the young man is “doing” theology in the sense that, for instance, Milbank implies. Indeed, it is intriguing that my interviewee’s form of evangelicalism (a Christian orientation that Milbank tends not to discuss in detail) leads him toward an appropriation of the social sciences rather than a conscious rejection of its assumptions.

Colossians 2:8 (King James Version).