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Before the Falling Out: W. H. R. Rivers on the Relation Between Anthropology and Mission Work

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FOOTNOTES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Before the Falling Out: W. H. R. Rivers on the Relation between Anthropology and Mission Work

Since the early twentieth century "revolution in anthropology," when missionaries were relegated to the ranks of meddling ethnocentric ethnographic amateurs, the relationship of anthropology to Christian missionary work has been to say the least problematic, if not on the whole generally antagonistic (cf. Salamone 1977). Although he later developed a close working relationship with several of the species, "The Missionary" was one of the stock of strawmen that (still smarting from his experiences with Rev. William Saville on Mailu) Malinowski posed against "The Ethnographer" in his charter myth for functionalist ethnography (Malinowski 1922:1-25; cf. Stocking 1983). But in an earlier period, when British anthropology had not yet come "down from the verandah" of the mission house or the government station, and before that, when its primary production site was still back home in "the armchair," the relationship of anthropologists and missionaries was quite differently conceived. At that time, anthropologists they depended heavily on missionary sources for their ethnographic data: in the earlier nineteenth century, James Cowles Prichard regarded them as more reliable than "naturalists" (i.e., scientists), because through long residence they became "intimately acquainted with the language of the natives" (quoted in Stocking 1987:79); in the evolutionary period, Tylor not only relied on the printed accounts of missionaries, but also maintained a close epistolary relationship with the Methodist missionary Lorimer Fison over an extended period. What might be called "epistolary ethnography" continued in the early fieldwork period, when a man like A. C. Haddon--remembered for organizing the Torres Straits Expedition--still carried on much of his ethnographic research at second hand by correspondence with "men on the spot"--several of them missionaries. And although privately they might be agnostics or atheists, British anthropologists were still close enough to their own (still predominantly Christian) religious roots to feel that missionary activity was on the whole a "good thing."

It is in this context that we reprint here a brief lecture by William Rivers, formulator of the "concrete method" which Malinowski took with him into the field, and for the fifteen years before his death in 1922 the dean of British field ethnographers. The occasion seems to have been the 60th anniversary of the Melanesian Mission, whose ship the Southern Cross had been the vehicle of survey work he carried on in Melanesia during 1908, the results of which were to form much of the basis for his later History of Melanesian Society (1914). Given during the 60th anniversary year of the Melanesian Mission in 1909, the lecture is unnoted in Rivers' obituary bibliography (Fegan 1922),

and unmentioned in the two major works on Rivers (Slobodin 1978; Langham 1981). It is reprinted here as it appeared in the mission magazine The Southern Cross Log, 15 (12/1909):564-67.

I am very glad to have the opportunity of speaking to-day on behalf of this Mission, with which I spent a very pleasant time last year. I have thought a good deal how I could best avail myself of this opportunity, and I do not think I can do better than make use of the two special lines of knowledge I happen to possess. I am a doctor and an anthropologist, and I shall speak, therefore, of the medical aspect of Mission work, and of the value of the science of anthropology to the Missionary. But first, I must refer to two matters concerning the present state of this Mission. I must say how very strongly was impressed on me, and must be impressed on every visitor to the Mission, the very urgent need for more men. I am extremely glad to hear of the great accession of strength of which we have been told to-day, but as has been pointed out, many of these men only replace losses, not only those due to workers having to leave the Mission, but also those which must especially occupy your thoughts to-day. I should like to remind you that this undermanning means more than the lack of adequate supervision; it means that the Mission cannot extend to new districts actually included within its field of work, and still more it means a great strain on those who are in the Mission at the present time. I could not help observing last year that there were members of the Mission who seemed to be taxing their strength heavily in the endeavour to keep up with the work. Probably, you will all have turned to the last Annual Report to read what Mr. Bollen had to say to you of his work in Guadalcanar, and you will probably have noticed that he speaks of that island alone requiring three men rather than one. I cannot help thinking that the great loss which the Mission has sustained by the death of Mr. Bollen may be put down to the fact that he was trying to do the work of those three men.

The other point I should like to mention before I come to my special subjects is the great change that has come over the Solomon Islands, especially during the last few years. The change there is enormous, the new European settlements and the return of Melanesians from Queensland having introduced quite new features in the situation. One could not but see that, as far as the work in the Solomon Islands was concerned, the Mission was at a very critical stage of its existence, and one felt there was need for more centralization. I am very glad, therefore, to learn of the new movement in the Solomon Islands which is signalled, if I may so, by the presence of Mr. Uthwatt with us to-day. The proposed change makes it quite obvious that there must be the means of getting about in the Solomons quite apart from those afforded by the Southern Cross, and, therefore, I should like to add my voice in favour of the urgent appeal issued by the Bishop for a vessel to enable those at the central station to reach the different islands.

I can now pass on to consider the value to the Mission of such medical as has been found useful in many other Missions. When I came to-day I was unaware that the arrangements for a Hospital and for the work of a doctor in the Solomons had advanced so far, and I was prepared with a number of arguments in favour of medical work which perhaps I need not now go into so fully. I will only point out one or two things. Medical work, as connected with Missions, may be looked at from several points of view. There is the point you will think of first--the medical and surgical treatment of natives. That, of course, is very important, but it is difficult to get Melanesians to adopt European medical remedies. As an example of the difficulty I may mention that during my stay last year in Melanesia, I was called to see a man who was ill and found him suffering from acute pneumonia. I spent much time and trouble in looking after him only to discover later that I had been one of thirteen doctors! During the time I was attending him he was undergoing twelve other treatments, all directed to counteract the influence of certain spirits and agencies to which disease is believed to be due. To me as an anthropologist that was interesting, and it gave me the opportunity of inquiring into the various methods of treatment, but to a Medical Missionary it would have been distinctly disappointing. On the surgical side, however, there is no doubt a medical man would have enormous power for good.

But we are now coming to realise that the treatment of disease is not the most important part of the work of the medical profession; that the prevention of disease--hygiene in general--is quite, if not more, important. And it is in connection with hygiene that I think medical men will be most useful in the Mission. The great scourges of Melanesia--malaria, for instance, and dysentery--are preventable diseases. I hope that Mr. Marshall, who is to go to the Solomons, will, with the aid of the oil-ship for which we are asking, be able to go about and do very much towards improving the general hygiene of the people, as well as in the prevention of the two diseases I have mentioned. It will be difficult, of course, to get the natives to adopt the necessary measures, but even if the work is disappointing in its direct results, I believe it will have the greatest value as an educative influence. There is no doubt whatever, that one great trouble the Melanesian is suffering from, whether he be Christian or still heathen, is loss of interest in life. His old occupations have gone, and he is suffering largely from lack of something, on the material side at any rate, in which to take an interest, and I believe that if he could be interested in this important matter of hygiene, it would do much for him. Last year, in the Western Solomons, I used to point out to the people the larvae of mosquitos and tell them that if they would get rid of them there would be no mosquitoes, and they would also rid themselves of fever. As I was there only a short time I was not able to effect much, but I found some tendency to respond to influence of that kind, and believe that much might be done in time. The educative effect of such work would be very great, for after all, hygiene is only a higher form of cleanliness.

There is another aspect of this medical work, and that not by any means the least important--its value to the members of the Mission themselves. There is no doubt whatever that the general efficiency of the Mission would be greatly increased if the healthiness of Melanesia could be improved. The annual loss in the working effectiveness of the Mission due to fever, not merely in the actual loss of time during illness, but much more by the sapping of energy it produces, can hardly be over-estimated, and, looking on the Mission from a business point of view, it may be said that any of its resources devoted to the improvement of the general health of the Mission would be well spent.

Not knowing that a medical man was already going to the Solomon Islands, I came to-day prepared to say that I hoped my words might, directly or indirectly, reach some young medical man interested in mission work, but though one is going, there is still room for others, and I can say definitely that I cannot imagine a more useful sphere of life or one of greater interest. If others come forward I know that you will not be backward in their support.

The other matter about which I wish to speak to-day is the relation between anthropology and mission work. What we anthropologists are trying to do in studying the customs and institutions of races all over the world, is to get at the native modes of thought which are at the bottom of those customs and institutions: and it seems to me obvious that that knowledge must be of the greatest value of mission work. But before I go on to say what I think anthropology may do for missionary work, I should like to refer to what missionaries have done for anthropology. Of course, no people have such opportunities of collecting anthropological information as missionaries, and the debt of anthropology to them is one of which one can hardly speak in adequate terms. I do not know how many of you are aware that one of the greatest of living anthropologists is a member of this Mission. Wherever anthropologists are to be found, whether in this country, on the Continent, or in America, one of the most honoured names is that of Dr. Codrington. You all know, of course, that his linguistic work is at the basis of the whole of the work of the Mission at the present day, but you may not know so well that his book on the Melanesians is one of the classics of anthropology.

To return to the value of anthropology to Missions; there are, of course, two kinds of Mission policy: there is the policy which would destroy all native customs and institutions and endeavour to start afresh; and there is the policy which endeavours to keep what is good and to build up the new faith on that foundation. I need not here go into a comparison between the two policies, for from the time of Bishop Patteson this Mission has definitely adopted the second and in my opinion by far the better method. But it is obvious that this policy is a difficult one. You cannot take the good in native institutions and reject the evil without knowledge of the good to be chosen and of the evil

to be rejected. Now one of the most definite accomplishments of anthropology at the present day is to show the existence of a very real morality, often behind customs that are repulsive. That is an opinion which perhaps you may not be altogether ready to accept coming from me, and I will therefore strengthen it by one you will not hesitate to accept. On my way home in the Southern Cross last year we called at Mara-na-Tabu, where I saw Dr. Welchman, and he suggested that I should come after the press of the day's work was over and have a quiet talk in the evening. I went ashore to see him with Mr. Drew--whom we are glad to have with us to-day--and had one of the most interesting conversations of my life. I soon recognised that Dr. Welchman had not only a very real knowledge of native modes of thought, but what is not perhaps so common, and what I may as well confess I had not altogether expected from what I had heard, a very real sympathy with native modes of thought. I soon found that he thoroughly recognised the existence of this native morality, and he made use of a phrase in this connection which I have repeated to many people since, which I would like to repeat to you now: he said to me, speaking of the natives, "We have almost as much to learn from them as they have to learn from us." In the course of conversation one often expresses an opinion perhaps rather stronger than would be adhered to after mature deliberation, yet I feel I am justified in repeating what was said on that occasion; for though it may be a rather stronger expression than Dr. Welchman would have used in writing, it shows how much he appreciated the existence of what is good in native ideas and native customs.

He went on to tell us of a special instance in which he had made use of this native morality, an instance which seems to me to be an admirable example of the policy of keeping what is good in native custom. The real centre of the native morality of which I am speaking, practically the same all over the world, is to be found in the marriage laws. Natives have very definite marriage laws, especially in relation to consanguinity; and the innovation which Dr. Welchman had introduced some two years before was nothing more or less than the introduction of "banns of marriage." He had arranged that when a marriage was proposed the banns should be read out not only in the places where the parties to the marriage resided, but also in any village where, so far as could be ascertained, relatives of the two people were to be found; and then after the banns were read a month was left for the people to come to make objections; and if objections were offered they were carefully considered by Dr. Welchman in consultation with the people. And he said the whole institution had worked admirably; occasionally frivolous objections had been made, but on the other hand there had been a certain number of proposed marriages which he had found wrong from the point of view of native morality, and he had not allowed those marriages to take place. Such a measure is one which is in absolute accordance with native modes of thought, but it is obvious that it is one which could not be carried out without knowledge.

In talking about this matter to-day, I have a definite practical aim. The measure of Dr. Welchman's, which I have described, was the result of twenty years' experience. Cannot something be done to give some small amount of that knowledge and of the results of experience to those entering upon work for the first time in the mission field? If a few years ago I had been asked what could be done in this way I could have suggested little. But great changes have taken place in our Universities in this respect during recent years. We have now definite schemes for anthropological instruction, courses of lectures specially adapted to the needs of those who are going out to work amongst races of lower culture, whether as missionaries or officials or in other ways. There is now at Cambridge, and also at Oxford and here in London, definite machinery for giving instruction in anthropology to those who want it. It is known that the whole question of giving such instruction to those who are going out as officials to various parts of the empire is now under consideration, and one Government, that of the Sudan, has already decided that those entering its service shall have a knowledge of anthropology. The practical measure I wish to suggest to-day is that the pioneer movement which among Governments has been made by the Sudan Government shall among Missions be made by the Melanesian Mission. I need hardly say that if that suggestion is considered I shall be only too glad to do my best if I can be of any help in putting it into practice.

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