

Chapter 4

Gods, Icons, and God-talk

Christian Theology, Sin, and Anthropology

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Concepts form the tools of our trade. They structure our thinking, orient our research, help us order our data, and allow us to communicate with each other. As anthropologists, we draw our concepts from many sources--"function" and "structure" from mathematics, "dynamics" and "equilibrium" from physics, "evolution" and "adaptation" from the biological sciences, and "taboo" and "mana" from other cultures. Careful attention by anthropologists to potentially useful concepts from other disciplines is needed.

One such discipline is that of theology, a discipline with deep historical roots in that part of our own culture with which anthropology is least comfortable. Yet, a historical analysis of conceptual developments in anthropology is incomplete without a recognition that those developments occurred in a context where theological concepts were pervasive. In a classic article on the history of anthropology, Irving Hallowell notes that anthropology addresses the same subject matter that religion has traditionally addressed and that anthropologists have replaced priests and theologians as the "class of persons to whom one could turn for authoritative answers to anthropological questions" (Hallowell 1976: 22). Hallowell stresses that all cultures have their own "folk anthropologies," that "the traditional Christian world-view" provided early western culture with such a folk anthropology, and that "this traditional world-view of the West is the historical backdrop against which changes in answers to anthropological questions may be plotted" (Hallowell 1976: 24).

The roots of anthropology go back to the encounter of the West with social others. At the time of the discovery of the New World, a whole cluster of closely related concepts were central to Western reflection on the human condition: sin, guilt, conscience, the will, natural law, vice, virtue, envy, gluttony, pride, etc. Christian theology (then queen of the sciences) stressed such concepts. The Catholic practices of penance and, following the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), of annual obligatory confession, required and generated enormous and complex discourses (theological treatises, confessional manuals, confessor's handbooks, sermons) on conscience, sin, and virtue (Delumeau 1990: 189ff). Protestants also generated lengthy tomes on cases of conscience, moral law, virtue, and vice. The literature of Dante, Chaucer, Milton, Spenser, and many others made abundant use of sin concepts--lust, anger, pride, envy, covetousness, gluttony, sloth--in their reflections on human nature and behavior (Bloomfield 1967). Murals, sculptures, and paintings featured personifications of the seven deadly sins, occasionally locked in combat with the seven virtues. In this pre-social science society, theology, sermons, the confessional, art, literature--in short, the whole culture--united in instructing people to reflect on and interpret themselves and others in their every act and motive in the light of such concepts. This is the background against which cultural anthropology was gradually to emerge.

And, if we follow Eric Wolf (1969: 3) in seeing anthropology "as a form of social action, operating within and against a certain societal and cultural context," then it is anthropology's action with reference to this pre-existent "folk anthropology" which must be examined. Several general points may be made about this action.

First, anthropology has tended to have an adversarial relationship with Christianity. When E.B. Tylor penned the phrase, "Theologians all to expose, tis the mission of primitive man" (quoted in Taylor 1986: 17) he was indicating his feeling that the utility of studying primitive man lay, in part, in its use for undercutting and discrediting the views of theologians, Christian theologians. In his article, "Religion and the Anthropologists," Evans-Pritchard suggested that most anthropologists historically have not been religious themselves and have been "bleakly hostile" toward religion in general and Christianity in particular. While anthropologists have not often written directly about Christianity, much of what they have written may be seen as an indirect comment on Christianity. Clifford Geertz (1968: 2) writes,

At the moment when [anthropology] seems most deliberately removed from our lives, it is most immediate. When it seems most insistently to be talking about the distant, the strange, the long ago, or the idiosyncratic, it is in fact talking about the close, the familiar, the contemporary, and the generic. From one point of view, the whole history of comparative study of religion...can be looked at as but a circuitous, even devious, approach to a rational analysis of our own situation, an evaluation of our own religious traditions while seeming to evaluate only those of exotic others.

If Hallowell is correct about Christianity being a key backdrop to the development of anthropology, and Evans-Pritchard is correct in seeing the social community of anthropologists as rather consistently adversarial to things Christian, and if Geertz is correct in suggesting that anthropologists make their points in roundabout and indirect fashions, then the relative silence of anthropology on Christianity need not imply indifference or neutrality. Indeed, anthropology may be seen as an active and value-laden form of social action in which the anthropologist, in the words of Weston La Barre (1970: 4) conducts, "his private rebellion in the arcane language of academic books"--a rebellion against, among other things, Christianity as the traditional religion of the West. And if the oft-repeated claim that anthropology has tended to have an adversarial relationship to Christianity is true, then it may also be true that anthropologists have tended to neglect or reject the use of concepts and categories from this older folk anthropology because of their associations with Christianity, rather than because the concepts and ideas themselves have been tested and found lacking for ethnographic purposes.

Second, as anthropology pursued its quest to be a respectable "science," it borrowed concepts, assumptions and explanatory logics from the physical sciences for use in understanding human behavior. Concepts which assumed human freedom or voluntarism, as many concepts from the pre-existent Christian folk anthropology did, were jettisoned as incompatible with a scientific treatment of humankind. Note, for example, Christopher Herbert's (1991: 42) treatment of E.B. Tylor and the origin of the culture concept:

[In] Tylor's *Primitive Culture*. . . rhetorical stress is laid upon promoting "the general study of human life as a branch of natural science"--as a study from which religious values have been wholly evacuated, in other words. . . . Tylor predicts that even what appear to

be the "most spontaneous and motiveless phenomena" of social life will prove to be subject to laws as definite as those of mechanics; what is disparagingly called "the popular notion of free human will" will be exploded. "The tendency of modern enquiry," says Tylor, "is more and more towards the conclusion that if law is anywhere, it is everywhere (PC 1: 2, 18, 3, 24). . . . The conclusion to which these juxtapositions of texts point is that the emergence of the scientific doctrine of culture may best be described not as a process of dispassionate investigation of evidence. . . but as a complex and sometimes insidious reconfiguring of moral and religious ideas, in fact of a whole sensibility, at a historical point of crisis.

With this anthropological or "scientific" reconfiguring of ideas and assumptions came an intellectual climate inhospitable to older "anthropological" concepts implying human freedom or voluntarism-- concepts such as that of sin. Thus, sociologist Stanford Lyman (1989: 119) writes:

The rise and proliferation of the sciences of man . . . have been attended by the fall and the contraction of the idea of sin. Perhaps most significant in this movement has been the philosophical victory in the minds of most educated persons of determinism over freedom. Once man was relieved of full responsibility for his deeds, once dark forces of the mind, of history, of heredity, or of culture were found to shape his thought and shackle his reason, sin with its insistence on the freedom of the will to choose between good and evil had to retreat into the recesses of a suspect theology. . . . Through the bloodless language of the new sciences the sins are neutralized.

The general patterns which Lyman points to in this area, may be discerned in the development of the discipline of anthropology as well.

A third factor explaining anthropology's resistance to developing certain concepts and lines of thought is the discipline-wide commitment to relativism. Sol Tax (1978: 8) writes:

Whatever propensities and values may unite and distinguish anthropologists, first among them is a view of life that is relativistic. . . . We are the only profession, or even community, for which this view of life is definitive. . . . It must be kept in mind that anthropology is a free association. Nobody has to stick with it, or with us. Hence the self-selection for propensities and values becomes confirmed by association, . . . books, . . . contacts with fellow students (etc.).

Sol Tax is suggesting that what the anthropological community shares is not just a scientific method or a specific subject matter but a set of value orientations best summarized as a commitment to relativism. He suggests the existence of a self-selection process whereby those most attracted to relativism are most likely to become anthropologists, but he only hints at mechanisms of social exclusion and control that are also operative within the social institutions connected with anthropology, an important topic we unfortunately cannot pursue here.

One effect of the commitment to relativism has recently been pinpointed by Robert Edgerton in his book, *Sick Societies: Challenging the Myth of Primitive Harmony* (1992) as a consistent tendency on the part of anthropologists to under-report the dark sides of life in folk societies and to present idealized or even romanticized portraits of the people being described. Furthermore, relativists are not inclined to dispassionately consider the use of concepts and categories (such as those stressed by theology) which put the focus squarely on the moral dimensions of human life--which focus research attention on people as moral agents who act in ways moral and immoral.

When anthropologists do fieldwork, they listen as people talk about the moral rights and duties of husband and wife, father and son, mother's brother and sister's son. They listen to gossip about the moral failings of others, about those who are stingy with food when they ought to be generous, of those who are lazy and do not contribute their share. They overhear parental admonitions, warnings, and moral harangues at youth whose transgressions threaten to dishonor their family's reputation. Sentiments of gratitude, of disapproval, of resentment, of love, of feeling hurt, and of obligation or responsibility are the stuff of day-to-day interactions and discourse. Interpersonal conflicts with their accusations, expressions of indignation, jealous defense of marital rights, and expressions of guilt, remorse, and shame are universally present.

Yet, anthropologists have fairly consistently refused to utilize an analytical vocabulary appropriate to the sociocultural interpersonal order as a moral order. They have borrowed concepts from physics, mathematics, and the biological sciences to the exclusion and neglect of other equally viable concepts that, if used, would call our attention to the moral dimensions of life. I suggest that the anthropological value commitment to relativism has served to block conceptual development in the direction of the ethico-moral dimensions of life cross-culturally.

Those few anthropologists who have attempted studies along these lines invariably stress that their efforts involve an unusual departure from

normative anthropology. Thus, Fürer-Haimendorf (1967) begins his *Morals and Merit: A Study of Values and Social Controls in South Asian Societies* by wondering why anthropologists, unlike moral philosophers, "have rarely concentrated on the investigation of moral ideas and their effect on behavior." He continues (p. 2), "Few accounts of anthropological fieldwork deal specifically with problems of morality, and ethical values are usually discussed only in connection with such subjects as religion, kinship, and social controls." More recently, in his introduction to *The Anthropology of Evil*, David Parkin (1985: 4) suggests that "while moral philosophy is big industry," anthropologists are characterized by a "reluctance...to study other people's ethical systems" and by a "shyness to say what they understand by morality beyond that it is a form of socially sanctioned behavior."

Perhaps the best known historical contribution of anthropology to moral reflection has been the assertion of the relativist dogma that there is no basis of appeal to any ideals or values beyond those already affirmed within a society--that there is no such thing as inalienable human rights, for example, only such rights as any society may choose to give. It is somewhat surprising, then, to find the American Anthropological Association invoking a concept from moral discourse (the notion of "rights") as the focal theme of its 1994 annual meetings in Atlanta. Anthropologists now wish to invoke moral language, something they rather often have condemned others for doing, and they do so without having worked very hard to generate systematic understandings of the arena of ethics and morality in other cultures. And so, we as anthropologists selectively latch on to one particularly ethnocentric moral strand of moral thinking in our own culture, one way of conceptualizing morality, and elevate it to a preeminent position at our annual meetings. I suggest that what we need instead is a broader research agenda focusing on the moral dimensions of life which would give broader intellectual foundations for anthropologists who would wish to invoke, or simply understand, moral language. The time would seem to be ripe for this.

Let's take one representative concept from theology, and look briefly at it, the concept of sin. When anthropologists do refer to this concept, they typically do so in ways which distance themselves from its use, suggesting for example that this is a concept employed by missionaries--a concept opposite to relativism, which is what anthropologists stand for. Thus, in his 1975 presidential address to the American Anthropological Association, Walter Goldschmidt (1977: 296) stated, "Missionaries are in many ways our opposites; they believe in original sin." If sin

somehow represents a pivotal missionary concept, then what is the concept that orients anthropologists in an opposite direction? The answer would seem to be relativism. Cohen and Eames' (1982: 376) anthropology text makes this explicit:

The premises of missionary work are directly opposite to those of anthropology. As cultural relativists, anthropologists begin with the assumption that any cultural system is as good or bad as any other system.

Missionaries, on the other hand, they explain, condemned "native customs" as "sinful." Roger Keesing's (1981: 40) anthropology text also contrasts anthropologists and missionaries and pinpoints the use of the concept of sin as what he finds particularly objectionable about missionaries, "The concept of sin must rank with smallpox among our most damaging exports." Similar comments appear in the literature.

But a more positive usage of the term has not been completely absent from anthropology. Marcel Mauss taught a course on sin and expiation at the Collège de France (Dumont 1970: 140). Robert Hertz (1922), Irving Hallowell (1939), Evans-Pritchard (1956), Whiting (1959), Fürer-Haimendorf (1974), Burkhardt (1989), and Parkin (1996) have all written articles or chapters on sin with many good insights.

But even when anthropologists use the concept of sin, they may be faulted on a number of grounds. The concept as used in theology is a cover term inclusive of any moral wrong-doing, including criminal acts, though not limited to them. Modern secular western culture has tended to drop the language of sin as a cover term (using other terms such as crime for many acts, such as homicide) and only employing the term sin where no other term can be employed. That is, the term sin, in secular culture is a residual category speaking of what religion (or God) condemns but which society does not act to sanction. Most anthropologists seem to have followed this secularized usage. It should not surprise us, then, to discover that not many cultures have concepts which call attention to a special class of moral transgressions which are unsanctioned by humans, only by the gods. And if we insist on limiting our usage of sin to such a residual category, then we will conclude that the concept has only limited utility anthropologically. But, if we return to an older usage of sin as a cover term for moral evil, we will find comparable concepts perhaps in every culture.

The English word, sin, as dictionaries indicate, is a religious term--a term with reference to God. And so, when Fürer-Haimendorf (1974) examines many cultures to see whether those cultures have words for "sin," he, like many missionaries, concludes that these people do not even have a word for sin, from which he concludes that neither must they have a sense of sin. When missionaries from amongst my own students make such pronouncements about the languages of given cultures lacking a word for sin, my immediate response is to reply that neither did the Hebrew or Greek languages (the languages of the *Bible*) have a "word for sin," if by "a word for sin" we mean a word with the exact same range of meaning as our English word sin. What the Hebrews and Greeks had was many words for moral evil--none of which was used exclusively in religious contexts. That is, words from everyday life speaking of moral fault or failure--words which were used of failure with respect to persons and human laws were also used to speak of failure with reference to God and his laws.

Thus, in Hebrew, 'chata' (חַטָּא) meant to "miss the mark" and was used for slingshots missing the mark as well as for human acts which violate moral relationships. It is often translated into English as sin. 'Avar' (אָוַר) meant literally to "cross over" and was normally used in a literal and non-moral sense. But when the law or a command (of God or king) was violated, it was like someone stepping over a moral boundary or line, and so, 'avar' was used of this moral delict--and translated into English as transgression or sin. 'Awah' (אָוַח) means "to bend or twist" and is used both for bent or twisted physical objects and for "twisted" moral character--translated often as iniquity or sin.

Altogether some 20 Greek and Hebrew words with root images of disgust, rebellion, treachery, of going astray, of harm, etc. are translated as sin, iniquity or transgression in our English *Bibles*. None of these were used in an exclusively religious sense. But, over time, "sin" became an exclusively religious term--a term speaking of moral failure in relationship to God. Then anthropologists and missionaries, with no sense of the cultural-religious history of these terms, tell us the startling truth that many cultures do not have a word for sin--failing to recognize that the very cultures from which we derive our term "sin" did not have a "word for sin," but many words for sin, none with the precise range of meaning of our current English word sin.

It is best then if we think of sin, not as a metaphysical concept, but as a sensitizing concept, as a working tool orienting us to comparable

areas in other cultures. Just as many anthropologists have recently been studying emotion vocabulary, so one can study the vocabulary of moral evil. In my own fieldwork, I discovered the Aguaruna-Jivaro of Peru to have a rich set of concepts applied to moral evil.

At the most general level is *pegkeghau*--bad. Anything ugly, deformed, dirty, bad-tasting, damaged or worthless is *pegkeghau*. But when used of people, it is almost invariably a term of moral reprobation. Stinging, theft, adultery, incest, laziness, slander and every other reprobated behavior may be condemned as *pegkeghau*.

Tudau is another term of moral disapproval, carrying exclusively moral connotations--used to characterize anyone engaged in active transgressions such as that of incest, bestiality, wife-beating, adultery, sexual exhibitionism, theft and above all, complaining about the food one's wife or mother has prepared. But it is never used of less active character traits such as stinginess, gluttony, or laziness--though these are morally condemned.

To be *yajau* is to be cruel, brutish, malicious, and without normal moral scruples. Anyone who beats his own mother, wife, child or dog from anger is *yajau*. One who is *yajau*, I was told, maliciously kills his neighbor's animals, offers his own sister to a passing stranger, molests women at night and draws or carves images of female genitals on earth or a tree. A woman who kills her own infant in anger, who beats her children, or who is constantly, actively pursuing sexual affairs is *yajau*.

Katsek has the underlying idea of ruin, harm, damage, destruction. It is used when one accidentally breaks a pot or burns down a house or when a dog or chicken threatens to contaminate one's food. But, it is also used for adultery, theft, lies, homicide, fighting and most disapproved behaviors--with the implication that these acts are damaging to others or to the community at large. *Katsek* tends to be used with strong affect, frequently accompanied by vigorous exclamations of dismay, alarm or indignation.

An animal born with an extra leg, a baby chick with two beaks, two bananas in one banana peel, someone with a clubbed foot, six toes on a foot, with one eye, a deformed ear, a hare-lip, etc. is *dese*. *Dese* clearly carries with it the idea of failure to conform to some ideal form. But, the term is also used to characterize individuals who fail to conform to moral ideals--to appropriate Aguaruna character traits. Thus, perpetual liars, thieves, disobedient children, women who actively pursue affairs, and men who continually approach women's beds at night are also stigmatized as *dese*.

Tsuwat literally means "something filthy," but is invoked continuously as a term for moral evil. Slander is referred to as *tsuwat chicham* (dirty speech) and the slanderer as *tsuwat wenintin* (one with a dirty mouth). *Tsuwat anentaintin* (one with a dirty heart) is one who, to outward appearance, has correct moral sentiments, but is inwardly malevolent. One who commits adultery or steals is said to be one who "works filth" (*tsuwat takaamu*).

Tsumain means "disgusting" and is typically used for foul smells, for decaying corpses and feces, and of any creature which comes in contact with such items--notably vultures, possums, maggots, flies, and dung beetles. But *tsumain* is also used of any especially reprehensible moral act, particularly of a sexual nature. Incest and bestiality are particularly stigmatized as *tsumain*, but so is any man who is overly desirous of sex--even if with his own wife.

Antuchu literally means "doesn't listen," but it is also used to characterize anyone who is disobedient or who refuses to attend to moral correction and instruction. Anyone who habitually violates right order as set forth by parents and ancestral tradition is *antuchu*. A sexually promiscuous woman may be characterized as *kugkatan antuchu*. *Kugkatan* is a compound word joining the word for an enticing smell (*kug-*) with the word for penis (*katan*). Sexual desire, in Aguaruna culture, is rather consistently symbolized in terms of attraction to an attractive odor. Thus a sexually promiscuous woman is characterized as *kugkatan antuchu*, as one who "doesn't listen because of the enticing smell of the penis."

Space does not permit further exploration of terms. But what is clear is that the Aguaruna have a very rich vocabulary of moral condemnation--as rich, one suspects, as that of the ancient Hebrews.

A coherent, sustained research agenda designed to produce cross-culturally valid understandings of humankind in relation to the moral dimensions of life is currently lacking in anthropology. Such a research agenda would need to include a systematic study of:

1. The moral vocabulary of diverse cultures. This would include broad cover terms for moral evil as given above (see also Evans-Pritchard 1956: 177-196), but also detailed vocabulary for more specific moral domains. Take the domain of over-eating in Aguaruna culture, for example. Aguaruna vocabulary with respect to gluttony is extensive. *Saji* literally means stingy, but is most often applied to those who fail to share what food they have and who eat more than their share. It

is a serious charge to accuse someone of being *saji*. *Yawetchau* and *mijamchau* are used both of gluttony and of insatiable and unrestrained sexual desire. With the negative suffix *-chau* added to the root *yawet* (tired, worn out) comes *yawetchau*, literally, "one who does not tire." The notion, informants noted, was of "one who does not tire of eating or of sex." Again when the negative suffix *-chau* is added to *mijamu* (calm) we have a term *mijamchau* suggestive of desire which cannot be satiated or calmed. The underlying idea is that of insatiability, both sexual and oral. The phrase *mijamchau yutanum--*"insatiable in eating" is sometimes used to make it clear if oral gluttony alone is in view. *Chakumin* refers to those who eat loudly and quickly with mouth open like a pig or other animal. Though explicitly referring to a style of eating, this term implies gluttony since anyone who eats in this unrestrained fashion is deemed gluttonous as well. *Ushu* refers to strong hunger but is most commonly used not of simple hunger but of gluttonous hunger. "*Ushu aipa*," "Don't be a glutton," parents tell their children. Those who eat a lot, especially of valued food items like meat, eat quickly, and finish off everything given them, are *ushu*, gluttons. *Esemjau* is a narrower term than *ushu*. *Esemjau* speaks of gluttony for one item, meat, and may be translated as "meat-glutton." Meat is the primary source of protein, and a relatively scarce commodity. Norms governing the consumption of meat are extremely rigorous. Meat should never be eaten by itself. The ideal way in which meat is eaten involves eating a small piece of meat accompanied by a large bite of manioc or plantain. Children are vigorously scolded for not eating in this manner. If a child fails to eat in this way, and eats its allotted meat too quickly, a parent scolds, "*apatua yuata*" --"Eat it joined together!" or more simply, "*apatuata*," -- "join it together." To eat pure meat, to eat large quantities of meat, to eat it prior to its being adequately cooked (out of impatience), or to eat it while all alone, is to merit the charge of being a meat-glutton, of being *esemjau*. In Aguaruna mythology and belief being *esemjau* is closely linked to being a cannibal. To accuse someone of being *esemjau* is a very serious charge.

2. Patterns of cultural symbolism in the arena of morality and moral discourse. Filth imagery frequently appears in moral discourse in cultures around the world. It often accompanies moral interdictions. Thus English-speaking parents may interdict certain books or words as "dirty." Those who violate the norm may themselves be treated

as dirty. For example, the Aguaruna insist that the incestuous have maggots on their fingers and in their mouths and so cannot be allowed to eat or drink communally with others. Since communal eating and/or drinking is central to almost all social events, this denial of commensality, under imagery of filth, effectively removes such transgressors from normal life. Filth appears in discourse, mythology, ritual and religion in cultures around the world in ways which closely link it symbolically with moral evil. This linkage of sin and defilement/impurity/filth has long been stressed by theologians. Paul Ricoeur's *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967) draws on such theological traditions in his superb exploration of the linkage of impurity and moral evil. Yet systematic explorations of filth symbolism in relation to the moral are virtually non-existent in anthropology (for exceptions see Burkhardt 1989 and Priest 1993).

Again, moral discourse in cultures around the world invokes imagery of debt in contexts of moral failure, or of moral obligation. Often such imagery is central in cultural contexts where morality is conceptualized with reference to interpersonal reciprocity rather than with reference to laws or abstract universal ethical principles. While guilt as defilement suggests removal by purification rites, guilt as debt suggests removal by gift-giving.

Various other patterns of cultural symbolism with close ties to morality and moral discourse could be pinpointed. For example, moral discourse often invokes imagery of animality or cannibal gluttony as symbolic of excessive desire not under moral constraint. Or again, the primary place where witchcraft and the evil eye exist is in moral discourse. And while both have certainly been well-studied by anthropologists, it is worth stressing that they have not often enough been studied with reference to moral discourse as a whole, of which they are a part.

3. Comparative ethics which explore universal and discretionary features of ethical features. Of relevance here is the extensive treatment historically by theologians both of natural law and of the distinction between *synderesis* and *conscientia*. *Synderesis* was that part of conscience which recognized *a priori*, intuitively obvious, fundamental moral principles. Theologians differed over whether such moral principles were innate or learned. But they agreed that such moral truths as the idea of natural law (i.e., the idea that there is an objective difference between right and wrong) or of justice (that

similar actions by similar agents under similar conditions merit similar reward or punishment) were *a priori* and intuitively obvious truths--as against second order principles which were contingent on circumstances, reason and cultural conventions. The first order moral principles of *synderesis* were thought to differ from second order moral principles by:

priority, independence, universality, and certainty ("anyone who were to doubt them would upset the whole natural order and strip himself of his humanity") (Greene 1991: 217).

Conscientia combined the infallible major premises of *synderesis* with contingent and fallible minor premises as the basis for practical action. The variable and fallible nature of conscience was due, then, to variability and fallibility in the minor premises, not the major.

Whatever the weaknesses of such theological reflections, they nonetheless raise important issues worth exploring today. Potts (1980: 71) concludes his treatment of conscience in medieval thought:

many . . . debates have turned out, in retrospect, to be cul-de-sacs, resting from the start upon assumptions which, once rejected, have made the debate seem largely irrelevant. . . . The medieval discussion of conscience is not in that category; . . . the questions do not have to be rejected; at most, some reformulation is required.

The questions here raised by theologians are worthy of being explored. Furthermore, anthropologists, due to their subject matter, are ideally positioned to explore these issues: that is, to explore universal and variable features of ethical systems. Yet, anthropologists have, with but few exceptions (for one notable exception see Shweder, Mahapatra and Miller 1990), contributed remarkably little to such an exploration.

4. Human impulses and propensities which move people to violate norms and persons. Meyer Fortes (1983: 23) writes:

I do not think it would now be denied that aggressive and destructive propensities are deeply ingrained in the nature of man. . . . [T]heir prevalence in human society from time immemorial is well-established. . . . And the problem of controlling these propensities has been perennial.

But while an occasional anthropologist such as Bronislaw Malinowski, Robert Edgerton, or Meyer Fortes, acknowledges the pervasive presence of such “deeply ingrained propensities,” and while Fortes feels confident that others will not deny this truth, the fact remains that anthropologists (with the partial exception of Freudians and sociobiologists) have not generally been interested in researching and exploring such social impulses or propensities.

Theologians, on the other hand, have had no such inhibitions. Under the rubric of the seven cardinal (or deadly) sins, theologians of an earlier era, generated extensive analyses and reflections of destructive, “sinful,” human impulses.

Envy was one such sin. But, if in an earlier era under the tutelage of theologians, envy was widely recognized and discussed as a perennial problem of human nature, under the reign of the social sciences people “found envy an increasingly embarrassing concept to use as an explanatory category or in reference to social fact” (Schoeck 1969: 12). In his classic study of envy, German sociologist Helmut Schoeck said that his examination of the subject indexes of major anthropological and sociological journals turned up not a single reference to envy, and argued that the social sciences have “repressed” the concept of envy, disguising the phenomena of envy with concepts such as ambivalence, aggression, tension, rivalry, etc. (Schoeck 1969: 9-11, 17, 134-159). Schoeck (1969: 128) hypothesizes:

A disinclination to concern oneself with envy may also be connected with the following: Almost without exception all research concerning man has, when faced by envy, seen it as a serious disease.

That is, Schoeck suggests that social scientists have a peculiar aversion to acknowledging the presence of social or “evil” impulses or propensities within people, an aversion not generally shared by theologians.

In his classic article on envy and envy avoidance, George Foster (1972: 165) agrees with Schoeck that envy seems to have been a taboo topic in anthropology and the social sciences. But although Schoeck’s book and Foster’s article clearly demonstrate that envy is a universal and pervasive reality and that envy and the fear of envy are central to all sorts of social and cultural patterns, envy remains marginal to most anthropological treatments of culture.

Gluttony was also a cardinal sin. But while theologians taught us to think about food in moral terms, anthropologists developed other lines of thought. Thus, as I commenced fieldwork in the Amazon, in accord with my anthropological training, I thought of food in terms of subsistence strategies, technology, and resources for meeting nutritional requirements (carbohydrates, proteins, fats, etc.) in the ecological setting of the tropical rain forest. Yet soon I encountered a moral discourse focusing extensively on gluttony vs. restraint--gluttony not as a sin against the self (as many overweight Americans might conceptualize it) but as a failure to exercise restraint on behalf of others. In a well-developed vocabulary of gluttony, in myth, in ritual, in food taboos, and in family and interpersonal relations, the evils of gluttonous impulses were highlighted. Indeed, vocabulary and symbolism from the moral arena of food provided the templates on which moral discourse concerning homicide or sexual transgression was modeled (cf. Priest 1993: 172-243). Anthropologists have not generally explored the types of things explored by theologians under the rubric of gluttony. But this cannot be attributed to a lack of such moral realities or concerns in the societies studied by anthropologists.

At least one sociologist (Lyman 1989) and one psychologist (Schimmel 1992) have recently contributed books on the seven deadly sins (see also Fairlie 1979; Capps 1987), suggesting that a revisiting of these older theological concepts has the potential for adding to, and correcting, their disciplines’ present understandings of human realities. There is every reason to suppose that anthropology, too, could benefit from interaction with these older discourses about the dark sides of human nature.

Other research topics of relevance to an adequate cross-culturally valid understanding of people in the moral dimensions of their lives might include an examination of: the relations of religion to morality (both in terms of sanctions and justifications of morality); the many ways in which ethico-moral ideals and standards are transmitted and inculcated; social responses to transgression (punishment, shaming, social exclusion, etc.); morally relevant sentiments (empathy, love, anger, indignation, guilt, shame, honor, etc.);² the various actions which transgressors who harm others or violate rules take to frame or deal with their transgressions (excuses, justifications, apologies, prestations, confessions), etc.

Most of these topics have been under-studied by anthropologists. When such topics have been studied, they are often studied as a marginal

part of some other research agenda. Seldom do such occasional treatments of certain of these topics give evidence that the author is adequately interacting with the relevant broader literature. Seldom, if ever, do we find anthropologists attempting to master the full range of topics essential for an adequate understanding of people as moral beings--topics such as those outlined above. One searches catalogues from departments of anthropology in vain for courses which attempt to pull together such understandings in a single focused setting. A coherent, sustained research agenda designed to produce cross-culturally valid understandings of humankind in relation to the moral dimensions of life is currently lacking in anthropology.

All of these closely related topics have extensive overlap with subjects treated historically in theology. It is my contention that such subjects have been under-investigated and under-developed by anthropologists, in part, because of a reactionary stance toward Christian "folk anthropology," that any effort to study such topics while by-passing theology will weaken the enterprise--while a more positive, less adversarial, relation to such historical domains in our own culture as theology has potential for strengthening anthropology as a discipline as it endeavors to construct better understandings of people in the moral dimensions of their lives.

Notes

1. My comments earlier about anthropologists going astray in linking "sin" too closely to religion should not be taken as denying that there often is a close link between religion and the moral. The question of whether and to what extent moral norms carry religious sanctions and are justified with reference to religion and the supernatural is a very important research question. But it is a sub-set of a larger set of issues, not the end-point of research where research ceases once any discontinuity with Western Christian concepts is discovered. It is the latter to which I objected.
2. Philosophers interested in metaethics or normative ethics have long sought some universal core to ethics and have looked for that core in certain universal moral rules. Increasingly, many philosophers are abandoning this quest as a dead end, and suggesting instead that better candidates for moral universals are certain universal moral dispositions. Richard Shweder (1990:210) would seem to agree. He writes:

What are the good candidates for moral universals? For one thing, there are certain feelings, the morally relevant emotions--repugnance, shame, anger, guilt, indignation, shock, dread, pride, empathy, and the feelings of being "lowered" or "elevated," "dirtied," or stained, sanctified, or cleansed. Those feelings form part of a rational response to a perceived transgression and may well constitute an ultimate aim of moral codes--to preserve and enhance the spiritual dignity of persons.