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Christian Difference. *A Review Essay*

MATT TOMLINSON

Department of Anthropology, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University

The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith, by Timothy Larsen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Transforming Masculinities in African Christianity: Gender Controversies in Times of AIDS, by Adriaan S. Van Klinken (London: Routledge, 2016 [originally published by Ashgate in 2013]).

Christianity, Conflict, and Renewal in Australia and the Pacific, edited by Fiona Magowan and Carolyn Schwarz (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

Praying and Preying: Christianity in Indigenous Amazonia, by Aparecida Vilaça (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

The discipline called the "anthropology of Christianity" began to gain traction in the early to mid-2000s when interested scholars focused on Christianity as an object of collaborative and comparative cross-cultural analysis. Along with several landmark works of Joel Robbins, one foundational text is Fenella Cannell's edited volume *The Anthropology of Christianity*, published in 2006. In her introductory essay, Cannell poses a pointed question for the volume and the discipline itself: "What difference does Christianity make?" Bracketing the question of whether "difference" can or should be defined (Green 2014), several anthropologists have taken inspiration from Cannell, including Naomi Haynes (2014) in the concluding essay to a recent special issue of *Current Anthropology*, and myself and Debra McDougall (2013) in an edited volume on Christian politics in Oceania. Difference, as the criterion by which continuity and transformation are evaluated, is arguably the key concept for an effective anthropological engagement with Christianity.

Compelling as the question is, it has one notable limitation: It counterintuitively runs the risk of decentering Christianity. After all, if Christianity is a difference-maker, then it cannot be the grounding context—the standpoint from which difference is evaluated as difference. Put another way, when a systematic

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theologian speaks of "anthropology," he or she is referring to the study of human nature grounded in divine creation; culture is secondary. When a social scientist speaks of anthropology, culture (or at least an appreciation of inherent human diversity, whether couched in terms of ontology, mind, or something else) is primary, and it is from this perspective that Christianity seems to come in from the outside, as it were, and reshape things.

To think in new ways about Christianity and Christian difference, several scholars in the anthropology of Christianity have begun to ask how anthropologists might engage with theologians in order to think more constructively as anthropologists (see, for example, Fountain and Lau 2013; Meneses et al. 2014; and Lemons in press). This is an engagement with pitfalls as well as possibilities, since scholars can misread historical connection as durable influence, mistake overlap for universality, and produce misreadings that are "corrosive" rather than constructive—but at its best, such an engagement might produce "a different tracing of the land by a different hand interested in different features. In combination they can be used by yet others to create a working map of the conceptual terrain" (Bialecki in press).

A key work in the new rapprochement is Joel Robbins' article from 2006, "Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship?" which looks to theology, and specifically to the Anglican theologian John Milbank's book *Theology and Social Theory*, to ask how anthropologists might "recommit ourselves to finding real otherness in the world" (Robbins 2006: 292). The article can be read in tandem with Robbins' recent call for an "anthropology of the good" (2013), which takes the project of discovering difference and proposes to develop it through such varied approaches as studying morality, hope, imagination, and care—approaches in which difference is treated as an inspiring reality rather than a fiction or artifact of domination. The four books under review here all make signal contributions to the anthropology of Christianity in general, anthropological engagements with Christian theology in particular, and also to a Robbinsian anthropology of the good by taking theology seriously as an intellectual interlocutor in projects that ask not only what difference Christianity makes, but also what kinds of Christianity difference makes.

Timothy Larsen's *The Slain God* is a keenly observed and unflaggingly sympathetic examination of the ways that Christianity (and especially Catholicism) and British social anthropology have shaped each other. Investigating Christian difference, it turns out, has been integral to anthropological theory in Britain for well over a century, but in ways that have seldom received explicit attention or the kind of careful articulation that Larsen gives the subject. He focuses on the works of Tylor, Frazer, Evans-Pritchard, Douglas, and Victor and Edith Turner, devoting a chapter to each and analyzing their divergent opinions on the truthfulness and utility of Christianity for anthropological scholarship. The anthropological use of theology—as foil, as inspiration, as constitutive of analytical categories, as object—is vital to each chapter.

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Tylor and Frazer are the first two scholars discussed. They form a resonant pair because they, unlike those discussed later, really did see anthropology and religion as fundamentally opposed forms of knowledge, with anthropology occupying the high scientific ground and duty-bound to help people move past the primitivity of religion. Tylor was raised a Quaker, and it was Quaker interests and connections that led him to anthropology. The Society of Friends' emphasis on helping "the less favoured races of man" inspired Thomas Hodgkin, who founded the Ethnological Society of London and introduced Henry Christy to ethnology; Christy then invited Tylor to join him collecting artifacts in Mexico, and a new career was born (Larsen 2014: 15–16; the quote is from an article by Tylor). Tylor thus turned to comparative ethnology because of Quaker influence, but he grew skeptical of his faith and in 1864 he and his wife officially left the Society.

Larsen, generous and perceptive throughout, observes that in some ways Tylor's rejection of religion was decisive but in other ways equivocal. With the certainty that spirits simply do not exist, the task of the ethnologist studying religion is to explain how people could come up with such ideas, and this became possible to do (or at least frame) with reference to evolutionary stages of savagery → barbarism → civilization and magic → religion → science. Yet Quakerism continued to mold Tylor's readings of religious practice, colored by his anti-priestly, anti-ritualist, and pacifist convictions. James Frazer, raised in the Free Church of Scotland, also rejected the faith of his parents but apparently had a "constitutional incapability of engaging in open conflict" (ibid.: 50) and never told them of his religious skepticism, nor his intellectual critics what he really thought of them. His epic lifelong project of comparative ethnology, *The Golden Bough*, changed along the way as Frazer was apparently disappointed that readers of the first edition missed his subtle references to Christianity. The second edition made the case more explicitly that Christianity was just another form of sacred savagery. Indeed, its preface "even evokes military metaphors, thus all the more clearly situating *The Golden Bough* in the polemical warfare model of the relationship between faith and science" (ibid.: 56). For both Tylor and Frazer, science, namely anthropology, could reform religion by getting rid of it.

The three scholars Larsen discusses in his later chapters, Mary Douglas and Victor and Edith Turner, are in many ways reverse images of Tylor and Frazer, as Larsen explains in an afterword. Whereas Tylor rejected the existence of spirits, Edith Turner in particular accepts their existence uncritically. Whereas Frazer mounted his hypereclectic project of comparison to undermine Christianity, Mary Douglas developed her own comparative project—and notably, turned wholeheartedly to theology—in order to build her case for the truth of Christianity. The middle figure in the book and in the conceptual schema Larsen lays out between Christian faith, theological engagement, and anthropological scholarship is Evans-Pritchard. As Larsen puts it,

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Evans-Pritchard is "the turning point" both for British social anthropology's relationship to Christianity and for the structure of his book; he "resolutely rejected the anthropological critiques of Christianity held by Tylor and Frazer," but he was also "remarkably circumspect about the possibility of proving Christian beliefs to the satisfaction of skeptics" (ibid.: 221; in addition, Evans-Pritchard famously converted to Catholicism, as did the Turners, and Douglas was a Catholic all her life).

The depth of these scholars' commitments to thinking theologically in their anthropology cannot be overstated. As Larsen points out, one of Evans-Pritchard's early publications was titled "Zande Theology" (in which he admitted that Azande actually had no interest in theology), *The Nuer* is studded with comparative biblical references, and *Nuer Religion* goes furthest of all, as Evans-Pritchard "repeatedly identifies Nuer spiritual beings as 'hypostases of the modes and attributes of a single God'—a technical term used in Trinitarian and Christological formulas." Douglas revised her famous treatment of Leviticus to make it "less about the nature of pigs and more about the nature of God" as her interest in theology grew. Victor Turner's "writings are … marbled with references to theological thinkers" (ibid.: 109, 171, 197). Taking all of this into account, Larsen suggests in his afterword—mischievously, he acknowledges—that one could read the history of anthropology as a move toward religious faith. His actual conclusion is moderate and persuasive: that anthropology will continue to push some people away from taking religion seriously and draw others toward it. His book is valuable for demonstrating the enduring force of Christianity in a discipline so often identified with its rejection.

The religious studies scholar Adriaan Van Klinken makes theology a central object of analysis in his monograph on Zambian Christian masculinity in the age of AIDS. He argues that the epidemic has motivated some Zambian Christians to think explicitly about manhood. A key observation of the book is that theologians understand the issues differently from the way church leaders and congregation members do. The former, inspired by liberation theology and its heirs, identify the problems with men and manhood as systemic—as the result of patriarchy embedded in larger structures of power. The latter focus on individual morality and identify AIDS as God's punishment for men's sexual misconduct.

Van Klinken's book can be read as theorizing disarticulation in several ways. First, as mentioned, he points out that theologians and non-theologians work within different systems of explanation that do not easily connect. Second, he criticizes theologians for ignoring the contexts of patriarchal relations: "The theologians are hardly sensitive to the subtle changes in gender relations and gender identities taking place in local religious contexts, and to the specific discourses that enable and shape these changes" (2016: 181). Third, he notes how African theologians draw on "global (pro)feminist academic

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discourse that is embedded in Western Enlightenment thought" to construct models of Africanness that require an ideal of fundamental difference from the West. These various disarticulations are reflected to some extent in Van Klinken's field method, since he makes heavy use of DVDs, websites, and interviews, with the result that much of the discourse he reproduces has a kind of weightless normativity. When men declare that they used to smoke, drink, and chase women, but have now changed because they knew this was not the responsible behavior of Christian men, it is difficult to know how to get analytical purchase on such generic descriptions. Men in New Jersey say this too, and I don't trust them either, but in either case, how does this help us understand the really lived details of Christian difference? Van Klinken evidently cares passionately about the people he has spent much time talking with, and also about the importance of his research—which truly attends to matters of life and death—yet the book's steep tilt toward observation rather than participation makes it seem detached at times, a metacommentary.

His observations are keen ones, however, and the book rewards close reading. Van Klinken describes significant differences between the two congregations he studies, a Catholic one with mostly lower-class members and an upscale Pentecostal one, both in Lusaka. The Pentecostals treat masculinity as a topic more explicitly and often than the Catholics do. Catholics do not discuss homosexuality; Pentecostals do, in order to denounce it. Catholics see themselves as "part of society," tolerant and gradual in their approach to social change and justice, with such entertaining comments as one young man's remark on premarital intimacy that he and his girlfriend are "not breaking the rule but bending it a bit" (ibid. 2016: 156, 99). Pentecostals emphasize a break between the church and "the world," and endorse an ideal of "biblical manhood" (156). They both agree, though, that men are at fault for most of Zambia's social problems.

Whereas for Larsen the critical aspects of difference are found in anthropological engagements with theology and Christian faith, Van Klinken locates differences variously between theologians who assert that there is "neither male nor female … in Christ" (Galatians 3:28) and laymen who point to Eve being formed from Adam's rib (Genesis 2:21–23); between Catholics who tolerate the socially dominant form of masculinity and Pentecostals who insist on a break from society and the world; and finally, between a consequential engagement with theory and an inconsequential one. Here is the forceful implication of Van Klinken's book: if gender relations are reduced to an ill-defined patriarchy which is never contextualized, what difference can theology truly make? Van Klinken offers a pointed critique of the terms with which his theological interlocutors work, arguing that the meanings of terms like "patriarchy," "soft patriarchy," and "gender justice" are treated as obvious. Writing about gender justice in particular, he observes, "Its meaning is considered self-evident, as the term is often used without explanation or reflection. In fact, gender

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justice is often equated with a feminist notion of gender equality" (180), a notion with which many Zambians who are not theologians, women included, are not entirely comfortable. Van Klinken's critique, in my own reading, is one of respectful frustration. He clearly considers theologians to be key voices for understanding transformations in Zambian thinking about masculinity, and has published collaboratively with the theologian Ezra Chitando. His evaluation of what theologians have said to date on the topic, however, is that it has remained disarticulated from wider social and historical processes and local cultural complexities.

A concept of difference is central to Aparecida Vilaça's *Praying and Preying*, but she uses difference not only to ask about the stakes of Christianity but about culture, ritual, power, ethics, and other troubled fundamental categories of anthropological analysis. Working in the "perspectivist" mode associated with the work of Viveiros de Castro, Vilaça tells the stories of a group of indigenous Amazonians, the Wari', who converted to Christianity in the late 1960s, then rejected it, and then returned to it when events like 9/11 and an earthquake in Brazil made them worry anew about the end of the world. The ethnography here is rich, mesmerizing, and occasionally astonishing.

For the Wari', humans are defined as predators. But humanity is not a stable category for Wari'. They believe that animals consider themselves to be humans and prey on humans in order to make them kin. Although humans and animals have an "innate mixture" that grounds all kinship (Vilaça 2016: 167), Christianity and pre-Christian Wari' cosmology articulate "alternate socialities" (ibid.: 25) in which the term *alternate* points not to a casual choice but to ever-present and occasionally threatening possibilities of alternation: now Christian, now not; now human, now not. Now what?

The Wari' were evangelized by the New Tribes Mission (NTM), a U.S.-based fundamentalist Protestant group committed to the principle of biblical inerrancy, the expectation of the end of the world, and the characterization of other Christians as wrongheaded. Converting the Wari' depended, among other things, on the effective translation of the Bible. Here Vilaça is at her analytical best, pointing out that what missionaries thought language was and how translation worked had little to do with what Wari' thought about these things. One of her key points is that because Wari', historically monolingual, developed the idea that humans and animals essentially shared a common language, their understanding of translation is existential rather than semantic and grammatical. (True, they say that different words are used by speakers in different life-forms: a living human calls a fish a fish, whereas a dead/spirit human calls a fish a corpse. This does not change the fact that "animals speak the same language as themselves … although they can be comprehended only by those who can 'hear' … what they say, a capacity that depends exclusively on the social relations established between them, especially living and eating together" [ibid.: 59].) For Wari', the real translators are shamans, who translate

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bodies and visions. A shaman does so by virtue of being "someone who contains difference within him or herself" (ibid.: 67).

Because the adoption of Christianity has dampened the practice of shamanism, one could plausibly argue that from a Wari' perspective Christianity has led to the end of translation. But here is the central claim on which all of Vilaça's complex argument depends: Wari' see Christianity as offering the opportunity for stabilizing humanity, for fixing themselves permanently in the position of predators, because the Book of Genesis makes it clear that humans were created by God separately from animals. Hell, for Wari', means being "prey forever," eternally roasted but never quite cooked and therefore never able to move on to a "new existence" (ibid.: 138). Christianity solves the problem of humanity's existential instability by ruling that problem theologically false, although Christianity has also introduced the figure of the devil, who now snakes his way into the position vacated by agentive animals.

Christian difference for the Wari', then, means to a considerable extent suppressing their previous understandings of difference and their specific methods for producing it, such as shamanism. From previously having no theology as such—there was previously an "absence of a demiurge or gods of any kind among the Wari'" (ibid.: 145)—they now have a God who makes them new kinds of humans. Difference is dead, long live difference! And yet here is where I stumbled, because Vilaça's reliance on perspectivism does not always seem to fit what Wari' are doing and saying, even though they are, as she points out, one of Viveiros de Castro's original "ethnographic inspiration[s] for developing the notion of perspectivism…, constituting one of the prototypical examples of this ontology" (ibid.: 257n5). The point of perspectivism, Vilaça writes, is that "the variable is precisely 'nature,' determined by perspectives that differ according to the body. The nature/culture poles of naturalist ontologies are thereby inverted" (19). This should upend cultural relativism in its generic form—and what could support this claim more strongly than to say that Wari' "do not see themselves through the lens of culture" (242; see also Robbins, Schieffelin, and Vilaça 2014: 572–78)?

But if the pivotal term and concept is "the body" (whose body?), then what are we to make of Vilaça's statement that the term she translates as "body" for Wari' means "what characterizes the person and refers not only to physical substance, flesh, but also to habits, affects, and memory. It explains why a person acts in a particular way" (58)? This sounds suspiciously like an old-fashioned culture concept. This concept, moreover, is identified with both individuals and ethnic groups: "This body not only differentiates individuals through their particularities but also differentiates the Wari' as a whole from other indigenous peoples, whites, and other kinds of beings" (222). After reading these statements, I found it difficult to agree with the claim that Wari' do not see themselves through the lens of culture, at least some of the time and in some ways. They evidently see themselves as producers of social difference, even

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if their spheres of social engagement are radically different from many other people's. At times the Wari' seem to live in the universe articulated by Viveiros de Castro, and at times to live in the one articulated by Ruth Benedict.

The temptingly simple explanation—that Wari' used to be perspectivist until Christian missionaries showed up and taught them to think about culture—is clearly not tenable, as seen in Vilaça's discussion of a myth that is explicitly "not about Christianity" (122). In the story, a boy kidnaped by the Wari' teaches them to see animals properly. Instead of calling every species a "jaguar," he says, they should recognize and call "jaguars" only those beasts with fur, spots, big teeth, and so on, and other animals should be called what they really are, whether lizards, monkeys, tapirs, or others (ibid.: 122–24.) In this non-Christian myth, Wari' seem to be making a significantly different claim about the world than the perspectivist line that, as Vilaça summarizes it, "There is no pregiven natural or objective universe" (68). Thus, even as I found the ethnography riotously entertaining and Vilaça's discussions of translation compelling, I was continually taken aback by the way that *Praying and Preying*, so magnificently illustrating the depth and force of cultural diversity—breathing the best kind of ethnography, in which you feel that you are barely keeping up with a radically different articulation of life, in which the frisson of difference finds its way into every paragraph, and by the end of which you feel that your own understanding of existence has been changed by spending textual hours with people who become jaguars—resolutely pushes culture into an ironic distance, turning it into the toothless token of stability that its critics never tire of denouncing.

The volume edited by Fiona Magowan and Carolyn Schwarz, *Christianity, Conflict, and Renewal in Australia and the Pacific*, has more modest theoretical ambitions than Vilaça's monograph, offering sharply observed ethnography framed by the theme of renewal. The editors divide the book into three sections, part I on politics, part II on persons, and part III on development, with the sections resonating and overlapping thematically. Each one has a commentator—respectively, John Barker, Diane Austin-Broos, and Joel Robbins—who introduces the chapters that follow.

All of the chapters develop insights into the ways people construct Christian difference. For example, Yannick Fer describes the short-term projects of Youth With a Mission, in which "cultural diversity becomes a kind of universal cliché that can help engage conversation—and missionary work—in any place in the world," a twinned act of difference-making and difference-denying (Fer in Magowan and Schwarz 2016: 94). Carolyn Schwarz, writing about health and wellness for Yolngu, observes that bad health is associated with the Christian mission, which brought foods like sugar and bread, but that good health is associated with a 1970s evangelical revival; even though members of the community still struggle with their health, the idea that Christianity can heal remains, and a common statement is that "God is the number one doctor"

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(165). Two of the most vibrant chapters are centered on Honiara, the capital of Solomon Islands: Rodolfo Maggio argues that conversion to Pentecostalism is motivated and shaped by local, internal logics rather than just external pressure, and Debra McDougall compares two kinds of Australian intervention in the islands, government-led "capacity building" efforts and the evangelism of a neo-Pentecostal pastor from Perth, prompting McDougall's question about why someone "from one of the world's most secular nations [would] 'plant a church' in one of the world's most Christian countries" (262). Finally, the volume also includes engaging chapters from Fiona Magowan on Yolngu ritual performance, especially song and dance; John Patrick Taylor on articulations of Christianity and sorcery in Vanuatu; Jessica Hardin on evangelical Christians' approaches to healing non-communicable diseases in Samoa; and Kirsty Gillespie on musical features and expressions of agency for Duna of Papua New Guinea. All contribute productively to the volume. In the remainder of this essay I will focus, however, on two chapters whose observations and arguments resonate most strongly with the theme of Christian difference, those of Alison Dundon and Gwendoline Malogne-Fer.

Dundon describes the poignant situation of Gogodala speakers in Western Province, Papua New Guinea, who were identified in the 1930s as ideal candidates to take Christian mission to their neighbors and compatriots. The Australia-based Unevangelised Fields Mission saw the Gogodala as "'chosen' or 'special' people," a characterization the Gogodala adopted enthusiastically (236). They aimed to teach their fellow citizens not only the Gospel but also how to live in (as they saw it) a more sophisticated way, and Dundon notes that they "firmly established their work at the center … of what soon became a national church—the Evangelical Church of Papua New Guinea" (244). But recent decades have seen a slippage of Gogodala influence, with regional Christian authority shifting to Tari in the Southern Highlands and the Evangelical Church suffering from denominational competition, dissent, and schism. A former leader of the Evangelical Church was a key breakway figure, founding a church characterized as a "true Gogodala Church" that would emphasize Melanesian identity and deemphasize foreign mission influences. While denominational proliferation can be seen as a productive process of critique rather than a continual falling apart (Handman 2015), the Gogodala are understandably dismayed by recent history. Indeed, in light of their ongoing marginalization, some Gogodala missionaries and their descendants feel that they now deserve compensation for their previous evangelical work because they helped other peoples to develop as modern Christians.

Malogne-Fer's chapter is a riveting account of theological disagreements over the performance of Mā'ohi "authenticity" in the Mā'ohi Protestant Church of French Polynesia (EPM). She places these recent disputes in the context of government efforts to "dissociate the promotion of Polynesian culture from the claim of political independence" (36), as well as changing models of

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pastorhood and the increasing influence of contextual theology, a branch of theology in which culture is treated as central to religious understanding and experience. A main actor in her story is the EPM's Theological Commission, established in the 1970s, which has led campaigns against nuclear testing and the selling of Mā'ohi lands. Beginning in the 1980s, the Theological Commission was led by the forceful Turo Raapoto (who had earned his doctorate in linguistics, not theology) and began to emphasize Mā'ohi culture's centrality to locally appropriate Christian worship. Mā'ohi language is used in most EPM churches, and indigenous musical instruments, flowers, and local clothing are used "to make the liturgy less austere and the place of worship more open to its environment" (45).

Not all church members have been happy with the indigenization of worship, and the EPM's own theological college, at which pastors are trained, does not always agree with the stances of the Theological Commission. The different understandings of what it means to be Christian—to put it simplistically, whether the Bible should reshape Mā'ohi or the Bible can only be understood by Mā'ohi *as* Mā'ohi—is seen most spectacularly in the performance of Holy Communion with coconut juice and coconut flesh or breadfruit replacing wine and bread. Some EPM churches agreed to this change and others did not. The church at Papetoai in Mo'orea was the first to take up the indigenized form of Communion, which ultimately led to a schism. Later, Papetoai also introduced Polynesian dancing (of the non-erotic kind) during Communion, which led to a further loss of members. Malogne-Fer notes that arguments for performing Communion with locally available elements, a potent distillation of contextual theology if ever there was one, were promoted for a time at the Pacific Theological College in Suva, Fiji, where some EPM ministers had studied, and they had been posted to Mo'orea partly because the island has so many English-speaking tourists and these pastors had English fluency. There are thus deeper commercial, cross-cultural, and cross-linguistic currents here than might be immediately apparent, and kinship inevitably works its way into the theological dispute: a deacon who initially supported the innovation in Communion at Papetoai withdrew his support when his son was not ordained as a deacon.

In his preliminary comments to part III of the book, Joel Robbins writes that the anthropology of Christianity, although still quite new as an intellectual project, has already developed "venerable themes" of "rupture, continuity, and change" (207). Along with these one can mention difference, the criterion by which continuity and change are evaluated; but difference also works itself into spaces that a focus on continuity or change cannot, reliant as those terms are on a temporal framework. Each of these books does an admirable job of investigating questions of Christian difference, and form a quartet in which the different titles' strengths are complementary. Larsen's biographical case studies show how ideas of difference motivated, shaped, and also

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limited the arguments of British social anthropology's most influential figures. Van Klinken offers critical insights about how a socially concerned theology can unintentionally disengage itself from shaping social process. Vilaça's ethnography is so captivating that it suggests new theoretical insights on every page even if one is not convinced that perspectivism is always the most useful approach to thinking about the kinds of difference she is discussing. Finally, Magowan and Schwarz's volume covers a great deal of ethnographic territory in an admirably coherent way, with individual chapters resonantly building the theme of renewal while elucidating the complex ethnographic details that make difference more than an abstraction. *Vive.*

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