

# AT THE CROSSROADS OF RELIGION AND MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

by Mark Taylor

*The new era requires a theory of extreme upheaval, a semiotics of violent chaos, a phenomenology of desperate failure. While even those accounts will require cultural grounding and symbolic exegesis, their vector, we must assume, will be toward the ethnography of disordered states.*

Arthur Kleinman, Writing at the Margins: Discourse Between Anthropology and Medicine (1995)

These words by Harvard's medical anthropologist, Arthur Kleinman, prompt us onto a terrain of analysis where we can discern some of the most interesting crossings of religion and anthropology. The crossings play within a homology that this paper explores, between religious-like characteristics in some medical anthropologists' own interpretive strategies, on the one hand, and their theories about religious (or spiritual) symbolic practices in the cultures they study, on the other. My argument is that this homology comes to the fore, especially, when medical anthropologists undertake what Kleinman termed an "ethnography of disordered states," which usually means conjoining theories of "extreme upheaval" with theories about more local, cultural worlds.

I will show how the homology is evident in the writings of Paul Farmer and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, medical anthropologists who both work the conjuncture between extreme upheaval and cultural construction. The argument about the homology has a two-fold significance. First, it shows that religious notions can cross over into medical anthropological practice itself, and, second, that those crossings shape, for good and ill, the way scholars (anthropologists or comparative religionists) cross over into the study of religious phenomena in other cultures. Before turning to Farmer and Scheper-Hughes, who offer some remarkable interpretive drama, permit me, first, a more pedantic methodological preface.

## A METHODOLOGICAL PREFACE

The places where religion and anthropology cross are multifarious and exceedingly complex. To facilitate greater clarity, we do best to approach these crossroads by speaking of the study of religion (which I will call "religious studies") and the study of culture (which I will call anthropology or "anthropological studies").

Both religious studies and anthropological studies are disciplined formations, i.e. they feature structured patterns - both practical and theoretical, both actional and conceptual, both discursive and extra-discursive - for approaching a distinctive subject matter. In religious studies the subject matter is the construct “religion,” in anthropology, the construct is “culture.”

To be sure, religious studies can also have culture as its subject matter, as when University of North Carolina (Greensboro) scholar of Religion, William D. Hart, examines culture for its “religious effects.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, it is well known that anthropology can take religion as its subject matter, as when many anthropologists examine religion, its cultural conditions and effects.<sup>2</sup>

Exploring the crossroads of religion and anthropology, then, means asking more questions than can be taken up in any one paper: What is religious studies, and how is it, as a disciplined formation,<sup>3</sup> related to the subject-matter, religion, which it constructs and then analyzes? Similarly, what is anthropological studies? How do we construct it, and how is its disciplined formation, practically and theoretically, related to its subject matter, culture, which is its key construct for approaching group and individual behavior. Moreover, if we are to focus such questions as these, in relation to the relatively new emergence in anthropological studies of “medical anthropology,”<sup>4</sup> then the complexity is compounded.

I am reminded of a basic belief of Haitian vodou concerning crossroads, i.e. that they are places of danger, places where decisions are often forced upon one, simplifications risked, and new

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<sup>1</sup> William D. Hart, Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Fiona Bowie, The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction (London: Basil Blackwell, 2000), Anthony F. C. Wallace, Religion: An Anthropological View (New York: Random House, 1966), and also edited collections by William A. Less and Evon Z. Vogt, editors, Reader in Comparative Religion, Fourth edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), and Michael Lambek, editor, A Reader in Anthropology of Religion (London: Basil Blackwell, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> I will usually refer to religious and anthropological studies as both “disciplined formations,” because even though they are discursive formations utilizing traditions of critical discipline, they rarely have achieved the status of “discipline” in a formal university sense. See Stephen Toulmin, Human Knowledge, .

<sup>4</sup> Byron J. Good, Medicine, Rationality and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4-7.

directions taken. The many questions conceivable, spawned from both religion and anthropology make for a dangerous crossroads, to be sure.

To navigate the dangerous and complex terrain at this crossroads, I will steady myself with two points of special salience. These formulate my assumptions and delimit my field of inquiry.

First, both religious studies and anthropological studies, pivot around key terms for their subject matter, religion and culture, which are construals and constructs by scholars. Both disciplines have had to traverse arduous routes to acknowledge that these are constructions, that neither what we call religion nor term culture are essential, given, static entities to be found “out there,” or “in the field,” waiting to be discovered. Instead, religion and culture are both negotiated enterprises, products of consent, accommodation, resistance and transformation.<sup>5</sup> Negotiating and producing these terms is carried on both within scholars’ own social worlds and also between their own worlds and social worlds of the others they study. Especially “religion,” writes religion scholar Jonathan Z. Smith when speaking of Europeans encountering indigenous America, “was not a native term.”<sup>6</sup> From the perspective of anthropology, we can say it is not an “emic” term to many of the peoples whose practices were studied by Western writers, most comprehensively with the rise of the age of discovery. It is primarily an “etic” term, belonging to the constructed cultural world of outside observers, to discoverers and later scholars, whose consciousness has been shaped by many of the forces of modernity. (Of course, within what might be called “the cultures” of anthropologists and of religion scholars, the term is “emic.”)<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the notion of “culture,” for this audience today, I will assume that this concept

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<sup>5</sup> I am adapting a formulation for religion and culture, which William Hart uses for describing “culture.” See Hart, 38.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in Critical Terms for Religious Studies, edited by Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 281.

<sup>7</sup> The two terms, emic and etic, are taken from linguist Kenneth Pike who derived them from “phonemic” and “phonetic,” respectively. Emic is “a perspective that uses concepts, categories and distinctions that are meaningful to participants in a culture.” Etic, is on that uses “concepts, categories and rules derived from science; an outsiders perspective, which may not be meaningful to native participants in a culture.” Serena Nanda, Cultural Anthropology, Fifth edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1994), 467.

in anthropology, is also a construction, a scholar's construal, one that is continually imagined and negotiated, not anything like a solid essence.<sup>8</sup> This constructivity of religion and culture, the two subject matters of these disciplines, is the first salient concern I work with from the crossroads of religion and anthropology.

The second, and most important salient point for this paper, is that in the anthropological study of religion there has regularly been a homology, a formal similarity, between how anthropologists negotiate the notion of religion in their own cultural settings, and how they negotiate it in the study of others' settings. There are many examples of this homology. British anthropologist, Fiona Bowie, notes that most of the seminal, founding theorists of religion in the West (the "great white fathers," we might say) - those who imagined it profoundly for 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century social science, and also many anthropologists today, "can only be understood against the background of formal religion in their own societies, which provided both the vocabulary and template for thinking about the religions of others, and a model to reject." E. E. Evans-Pritchard pointed this out in several of his works, notably in Primitive Religion, but also in an essay, "Religion Among the Anthropologists" (1960). From the former is this quote:

Tylor had been brought up a Quaker, Frazer a Presbyterian, Marett in the Church of England, Malinowsky a Catholic, while Durkheim, Levy-Bruhl, and Freud had a Jewish background; but with one or two exceptions, whatever the background may have been, the persons whose writings have been most influential have been at the time they wrote agnostics or atheists Primitive religion was with regard to its validity no different from any other religious faith, an illusion.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Catherine Bell, in her studies of ritual and religion, has noted a homology between the structural interests in ritual held by analytic observers of ritual, on the one hand, and the structural meanings of ritual for the ritual actors. In other words, theories of ritual are meaningful for ritual theorists and for ritual actors, and the meanings attributed to the actors are never disconnected from the interests of the ritual theorist. This does not mean that the meanings for the

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<sup>8</sup> James Clifford and George Marcus, Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (Berkeley: University of California, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Primitive Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965) 14-15.

two groups will be the same, but they do need to be interpreted together, and studied in their complex relation, if we are really to understand any particular theoretical claims about a culture's ritual practice or religion.<sup>10</sup> This homology in ritual and religious studies is a feature of a pervasive tendency, evident in anthropology from its beginnings in the West, wherein other cultures were studied as part of the West's own self understanding. "Other cultures," writes Henrietta Moore in Feminism and Anthropology, "were, if you like, a way of understanding, commenting and reflecting on the peculiarity of Western culture."<sup>11</sup> I assume, then, that the homology is a long-standing aspect of anthropology's hermeneutical structure, and it needs to be explored consciously and critically.

#### MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS -

#### BETWEEN CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION AND EXTREME UPHEAVAL

We can now go back to Kleinman's words, those about "extreme upheaval" and "cultural worlds," and so enter into some medical anthropologists' hermeneutic to see what it reveals about the crossings of religion and anthropology.

With the words of the opening quote, Kleinman was giving rhetorical flourish to his conclusions regarding anthropologist Christopher Taylor's book about healing practices in Rwanda, Milk, Honey and Money: Changing Concepts in Rwandan Healing (1992). Kleinman included Taylor's book along with several others among a new wave of ethnographies relevant to the formation of medical anthropology in the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> Kleinman responded to Taylor's ethnography positively, lauding it for showing how the healing systems in Rwandan culture can be analyzed symbolically in order to illuminate their relationships to political and economic processes.<sup>13</sup> He criticized Taylor, however, for presupposing an earlier anthropological paradigm, in which "culture"

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<sup>10</sup> Catherine Bell, Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 21, 28-29.

<sup>11</sup> Henrietta L. Moore, Feminism and Anthropology (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988), 186.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Kleinman, "The New Wave of Ethnographies in Medical Anthropology," in Kleinman, Writing at the Margin: Discourse Between Anthropology and Medicine (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1995), 193-256, esp. 205.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

could be seen as a steady-state, homogeneous entity, instead of as the always negotiated and constructed figuration, as culture now is so often understood.<sup>14</sup>

In just two short years after Christopher Taylor's ethnography, Rwanda would explode in 1994 with the violence and genocide for which now it is so well known. Over a million were killed in March and April of 1994. Christian Science Monitor correspondent, Scott Peterson, described the genocide as unrivaled in its systemic efficiency.<sup>15</sup> Political leaders and army commanders of the ethnic Hutu spent years preparing for a slaughter of all rival Tutsis, along with all moderate Hutu. In 1994, Peterson writes, "the daily kill rate was five times that of the Nazi death camps. . . . The daily death rate averaged well more than 11,500 for two months, with surges as high as 45,000. During this peak, one murder was committed every 2 seconds of every minute, of every hour."<sup>16</sup> Many analysts emphasize that as extensive and well-organized as the killing was, it could have been blocked by the U.S. and other nations with little or no loss of life by intervening forces.<sup>17</sup> The monumental slaughter, therefore, was compounded in its moral heinousness by the hand-wringing, inactivity of supposedly "civilized" nations, preeminent among them, the U.S., which blocked official UN labeling of the crisis as "genocide," since this would have compelled U.S. action.

It was from a post-1994 perspective, in fact, that Kleinman was writing, declaring that Taylor's ethnography portrayed a cultural world that was an "intellectual construction of an era in Rwanda that is gone, a world that no longer exists."<sup>18</sup> Extreme upheaval, violent chaos, desperate failure now override and eclipse the construction of his cultural world in Rwanda.

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<sup>14</sup> June C. Nash, Maya Visions: The Quest for Autonomy in an Age of Globalization (New York: Routledge, 2001), 19, 229; and John Watanabe, Maya Saints, Sinners & Souls in a Changing World (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 5-17 .

<sup>15</sup> Scott Peterson, Me Against My Brother: At War in Somalia, Sudan, and Rwanda (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 252.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, 5-6.

<sup>18</sup> Kleinman, 205.

Anthropologist Christopher Taylor came back quickly in 1999 with another book, Sacrifice as Terror: The Rwandan Genocide of 1994, in which he argued that the cultural worlds he had studied in Rwandan popular medicine, were not rendered obsolete or irrelevant, consignable to some cultural world now exposed as only the anthropologist's constructed fancy. To the contrary, the cultural worlds in which social forms and symbols are inscribed on Rwandan bodies, formed a kind of *habitus*, he argued, and were very much operative in the historical actions of genocide. He did not argue that these cultural worlds, or some Rwandan *habitus*<sup>19</sup>, alone caused the horrific events. He did go on to show, however, the crucial contribution of Rwandan culture to the political and historical unfolding of terror.

For example, the Rwandan cultural use of “flow/blockage” imagery in relation to the body, so crucial to Rwandan popular medicine, was variously played out in the terror. The Hutu characterized their enemy, the Tutsi, as blocks to the health of the body politic; hence, the Tutsi were like invading organisms that need to be expelled, eliminated. Invasive Tutsi were almost always apprehended and slain at a seemingly excessive number of road blocks along major highways. Even though genocidal efficiency did not require use of so many roadblocks, cultural meaningfulness guided an orientation to killing and removal of Tutsi invaders toward liminal highway places, where the cultural drama of “flow/blockage” could be acted out. Thousands of executed Tutsi were then eliminated through the river conduits of the country. Hutu torturers also played out their cultural understandings of flow/blockage, and concern with conduits, by attacking the reproductive and digestive conduits of Tutsi bodies through rape and impalement. These were not just physically excruciating and inhumane, but also culturally meaningful in the conflict convulsing that body politic.

As a cultural anthropologist, then, what Taylor offered in his later book, was a study of how his cultural studies of popular medicine live on in the rituals of terror inscribed on culturally

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<sup>19</sup> The notion of “habitus” may be viewed as a more expansive notion of culture, but one that concerns the way social practice is patterned in relation to the body. The notion was set forth in Marcel Mauss, “The Notion of Body Techniques,” in Sociology and Psychology: Essays (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950), 97-119. It was then developed further in Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

patterned bodies.<sup>20</sup> His work constitutes, he says, a “cultural hieroglyphics of torture and violation.”<sup>21</sup>

VITAL LIMINALITY & ANTHROPOLOGICAL DIVINATION -  
THE QUESTS OF PAUL FARMER AND NANCY SCHEPER-HUGHES

Arthur Kleinman’s critique of Christopher Taylor, and Taylor’s response in his second Rwanda book, brings out some operations that anthropologists increasingly are holding in tension, i.e. those that identify and theorize extreme upheaval on regional and global levels, on the one hand, and those that construct more local, cultural worlds that variously interact with global upheaval, on the other.

Paul Farmer and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, who have been influential in recent medical anthropology as well as in anthropology generally, undertake these operations in a thoroughgoing, dramatic and self-conscious manner. They each are U.S.-based anthropologists, with all the virtues and vices of that nationality. Ethnographically, their long-term fieldwork has been performed in cultural worlds which, if not quite as dramatically as Rwanda, nevertheless have constituted their own kind of “killing fields,” both historically since the time of the conquest, and in more recent times under U.S. military, political and economic hegemony.

Among many similarities that make comparing their differences interesting, both Farmer and Scheper-Hughes hold together in their work two of the major “types” of medical anthropology identified by Byron Good in the study of illness representations in culture, the “meaning-centered” or “interpretive” type and the “critical” type.<sup>22</sup> Let us enter into each anthropologist’s work.

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<sup>20</sup> Taylor, 182.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 31.

<sup>22</sup> Good identifies a total of four types of “orienting approach” or “theoretical approach” in medical anthropology since the late 1970s. They are differentiated from one another by a distinctive way of studying illness representations. These approaches include: 1) treating illness representations as folk beliefs (an empiricist tradition); 2) treating illness representations as cognitive models (as in “cognitive anthropology”); 3) treating illness representations as “culturally constituted realities (meaning centered or “interpretive” anthropological approach); and 4) treating illness representations as mystification (“critical” anthropology). See Byron J. Good, Medicine, Rationality and Experience: An Anthropological



(Paul Farmer's Quest for "Vital Liminality")

Paul Farmer is director of the Program in Infectious Disease and Social Change at the Harvard Medical School. He works both at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital and the Clinique Bon Sauveur at the heart of Haiti, a clinic that he helped to found. Although this is to navigate and cross worlds dramatically different (Haiti/Boston), Farmer finds that through his medical work and cultural observations that for all the differences along the "Harvard/Haiti axis," he was living "in the same world."<sup>23</sup> His first publication was AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame (1992), followed by The Uses of Haiti (1994), Women, Poverty and AIDS (1996), which won the Eileen Basker Prize, and most recently, Infections and Inequalities: the Modern Plagues (1999), winner of the Margaret Mead Award. Across all his writings he exhibits the work of "a full-time clinician who is also an anthropologist." His essays are "lodged between medicine and anthropology, drawing freely on both disciplines and on several others, including the sociology of knowledge."

Farmer has presented his own "cultural model" of Haitian worlds, which has been important for studying the horrific rate of death from AIDS, the first case of which appeared in his clinic in 1986.<sup>24</sup> In his own cultural model, he attends to how the illness is represented and laden with meanings such that a consensus among Haitians about the disease is negotiated.<sup>25</sup> Farmer ends one of his major essays on the cultural model, by identifying "three preexisting meaning structures into which sida [AIDS] neatly fit:" a "blood paradigm-which posits causal links between the social field and alterations in the quality, consistency, and nature of blood," a "tuberculosis paradigm" which is a set of meanings developed over a long time of Haitian peoples' suffering of tuberculosis and which has yielded a certain consensus about causality, where beliefs about sorcery, divination and treatment all play key roles. Then, there is also a "microbe paradigm" that is the result of

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Perspective (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 36-62.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Farmer, Infections and Inequalities: The Modern Plagues. Updated edition with a new Preface (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1999), 22.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 20.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 159

international doctors' work in Haiti, which has come to be held alongside the more rural-based paradigms.<sup>26</sup>

We cannot here debate and discuss Farmer's cultural model in detail. What is more relevant to this paper is Farmer's insistence that a cultural model is not sufficient for understanding the spread of AIDS or even for understanding people's own representations of the illness. Medical anthropology's study of illness representations also must be placed in relation to the study of history and political economy. "AIDS, an illness that 'moves along the fault lines of society,' demands nothing less."<sup>27</sup>

Farmer faults anthropology for often being content only to do "the cultural piece," when studying illness and treatment patterns. Especially when faced with a disease like AIDS, or any other of the afflictions suffered by the world's "destitute sick," we have to attend to the inequalities of wealth between peoples that are enforced by a political economy on the global level. There is for Haitians, as for many others, "a political economy of risk," a "political economy of brutality."<sup>28</sup> Farmer's overall argument is that unequal distribution of world income sets the fault lines for marking the suffering of death from infectious disease. Among the poorest fifth of the world's population, a full 56 percent of all deaths are due to pathologies, and preventable infectious disease heads the list of these pathologies. Among the richest fifth, only 8 percent of all deaths are from such pathologies.<sup>29</sup> Of course, the problem of inequality is not just economic, even though economic disparity does affect the availability of needed technology and medicine for the fighting of infectious disease. This inequality is a mix of economic class issues, global latitude (North/South), race, gender and power politics.

Certain "cultural models" of Haitian life have only compounded the neglect by

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 181-2.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 182.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Farmer, The Uses of Haiti (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1994), 297-320.

<sup>29</sup> Farmer is here (p. 42) citing the work of D. R. Gwatkin and P. Heuveline, "Improving the Health of the World's Poor." British Medical Journal 315 (1997): 497.

anthropologists of political economy at the international and global levels. In particular, anthropologists' tendencies to describe "the cultural piece" in studying illness and suffering, often have entailed some vicious stereotypes that conveniently distract from analysis of Haiti's political vulnerability to disease. Anthropologists and other social scientists, often following the media, have cited "voodoo practices" in accounting for the rise of the AIDS epidemic.<sup>30</sup> The Journal of the American Medical Association, for example, published an article considering theories that voodoo culture is implicated in the rise of AIDS, using a title, "Night of the Living Dead," in which stereotypical readings of voodoo, such as one might find in a Hollywood B movie, are used to account for the spread of AIDS.<sup>31</sup>

Anthropologizing the culture piece in this way exoticizes and glosses Haitian complexity. "Voodoo" (the Hollywood stereotype uses the spelling with double "oo's") is a word, writes Alfred Metraux in 1959, that "usually conjures up visions of mysterious deaths, secret rites - or dark saturnalia celebrated by 'blood-maddened, sex-maddened, god-maddened' negroes."<sup>32</sup> In other words, summarizes Farmer, the exoticizing of cultural models of Haitian difference are to be found in many social science and medical accounts of AIDS, and these models, often only resonate "with a North American folk model of Haitians."<sup>33</sup>

This is only a blatant example of what Farmer sees in many medical anthropologists' descriptions of the "cultural" piece in their studies of disease in Haiti. This is a problem, he says of "conflating cultural difference and structural violence." Instead of studying Haiti's vulnerable position politically and economically, which has everything to do with its current suffering of untreated infectious disease (Tuberculosis, as well as AIDS), anthropologists' cultural descriptions

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<sup>30</sup> Farmer, Infections and Inequalities, 142.

<sup>31</sup> W. Greenfield, "Night of the Living Dead II: Slow Virus Encephalopathies and AIDS: Do Necromantic Zombists Transmit HTLV-III/LAV During Voodooistic Rituals?" Journal of the American Medical Association 256 (16): 199-200. Cited in Farmer, Infections and Inequalities, 106.

<sup>32</sup> Alfred Metraux, Haitian Voodoo. Translated by Hugo Charteris (New York: Schocken, [1959] 1972), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Farmer, 100.

tend to transfer the problem to the symbolics of Haitians' local culture. This problematic conflation can occur, even when there is not an obvious exoticization occurring, as in the references to Haitian "voodoo." It can occur whenever the anthropologist abstains from focusing on the larger field of political and economic structures within which cultural meaning-making occurs.

Resistance to disease, and the growth of anthropological knowledge of culture, are both hampered when the cultural piece triumphs over the political and economic. Farmer devotes his entire book, therefore, to developing the overall thesis, which constitutes a kind of warning and plea, that social inequalities (constituted along the lines of not only rich and poor, North and South, but also by way of racial and gender injustice) must be studied by anthropologists and those in medicine, as a "co-factor" in accounting for the rise of epidemic disease in our time.

Failing to do this, anthropologists may well "miss the revolution," writes Farmer. In other words, they will miss attending to the suffering with which people and their cultures struggle, and they will miss the challenge and opportunity to participate in its alleviation. Farmer cites Orin Starn about the ironic phenomenon of anthropologists studying Andean culture, unmindful of the brewing revolutionary and violent change that Shining Path guerillas and Peruvian government forces were working in the village areas they studied. (A similar neglect of structural violence occurred in Guatemala, where many U.S. anthropologists seemed to produce various cultural studies of the Maya without noting the political terror all around. Thus, as long-time anthropologist in Guatemala, Richard Adams, lamented, anthropologists failed to attend to "the study of violence, terror, and war."<sup>34</sup>)

Farmer cites a passage from Starn's analysis of anthropology in the Andes, entitled "Missing the Revolution: Anthropologists and the War in Peru," which summarizes much of the longstanding tendency of cultural studies in anthropology to elide cultural difference and structural violation.

Ethnographers usually did little more than mention the terrible infant mortality, minuscule incomes, low life expectancy, inadequate diets, and abysmal health care that remained so routine. To be sure, peasant life was full of joys, expertise and

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<sup>34</sup> Richard N. Adams, "Conclusions: What Can We Know About the Harvest of Violence?" in Robert M. Carmack, Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 274-91, esp. p. 275.

pleasures. But the figures that led other observers to label Ayacucho a region of “Fourth World” poverty would come as a surprise to someone who knew the area only through the ethnography of Isbell, Skar, or Zuidema. They gave us detailed pictures of ceremonial exchanges, Saint’s Day rituals, weddings, baptisms, and work parties. Another kind of scene, just as common in the Andes, almost never appeared: a girl with an abscess and no doctor, the woman bleeding to death in childbirth, a couple in their dark adobe house crying over an infant’s sudden death.<sup>35</sup>

Farmer describes his own first efforts in anthropology as a “missing of the revolution.”<sup>36</sup>

Realities of Haitian politics and suffering would soon cure him of that. Again, this would result in no scorning of cultural studies and of the values of cultural difference and construction; but all of that would have to be seen alongside and within factors of political economic structural violence.

Before leaving Farmer, I want to note how he uses language that crosses over onto terrain that is frequently viewed as religious in character. Later in this essay, I will examine in greater detail this language of Farmer’s as a kind of “limit-language” in his anthropological discourse. When Farmer works the conjuncture noted by Kleinman, between studying cultural worlds and analyzing “extreme upheaval,” he invokes language that is at least puzzling from the perspective of those not accustomed to see anthropologists themselves using religious terminology.

Note especially, for example, Farmer’s explicit embrace of a liminal stance in his practice of anthropology. He extracts a quote about liminal practice from Arthur Kleinman’s Writing At the Margin, and sets it as epitaph at the opening of one of his central chapters, “Miracles and Misery: An Ethnographic Interlude.” The passage reads as follows:

The margin between social theory and the ethnography of social suffering is a space of vital liminality. It is a threshold to something new, an unoccupied no-man’s-land open for exploration. Such a liminal position can animate a critically different reflection on medicine and society, a reflection that need not accept things as they are.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> O. Starn, “Missing the Revolution: Anthropologists and the War in Peru.” In Rereading Cultural Anthropology, edited by George Marcus (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 168. Cited from Farmer, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>37</sup> Farmer, 150, citing Kleinman, who goes on to say, “And it is in the liminality of illness, poverty, and other forms of human misery that I have found the subject that animates my

In this use of liminality, Farmer (following Kleinman) is appropriating a term used by Arnold Van Gennep, and then developed further from Victor Turner's studies of Ndembu puberty rituals in Africa. He then applies the notion of liminality to his own practice of medical anthropology. Turner himself allows for such a possibility, in such works as Dramas, Fields and Metaphors, where he applied the notion of liminality to a wide array of cultural phenomena, which certainly would include the phenomenon of anthropologists themselves struggling with theory and moral action in history.<sup>38</sup>

Liminality as “vital,” as life-giving, is a pervasive concern of Farmer's text, Infections and Inequalities. His opening chapter, offering a personal narrative of his own ethnographic and medical work in Peru, Haiti and Boston, attends to a series of liminal encounters (e.g. along the Harvard/Haiti axis), and the chapter is itself entitled, “The Vitality of Practice.” It is not an exaggeration to say that a certain quest for vital liminality is the source of much of his theory and moral practice. “The unarguable immediacy” of the needs of the destitute sick, and the “vitality of practice” among them, seemed to Farmer a “sufficient rejoinder to both the uninspiring social science and the ultimately punitive policies favored by the burgeoning development bureaucracies.”<sup>39</sup>

Farmer develops further his notion of vital liminality. From it flows, not only an impulse to construct cultural worlds of the other, but also to seek a sense of connection between worlds of others. It leads him to be part of a “quest for connections.” Such a quest Farmer interprets as a corrective to fragmented, constructionist anthropology, with which he early on had become disenchanted.<sup>40</sup>

The quest for connection leads him to cultivate a sense of global connection in a time of  

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world, morally as much as professionally” (p. 3).

<sup>38</sup> See Turner's commentary on the “liminoid genre” and “limina of history” for discourse that extends his notions of liminality and communitas throughout a wide variety of cultural phenomena, in Victor Turner, Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in human Society (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 14-17, 28, 98-99, 242.

<sup>39</sup> Farmer, 24.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 23.

extreme upheaval and suffering, without letting go of the more traditional anthropological concern in constructing peoples' more local, cultural worlds. This sense of connection entails also Farmer's frequent calls for an "alternative vision" in anthropologies of suffering, a vision to orient anthropologists to seek alleviation of individual suffering and also to redress the political economy of brutality that sustains the great inequalities of today. These latter often form the matrix that enables the surging of infectious disease and death.<sup>41</sup>

He also advocates "a more ambitious agenda" than anthropologists are often willing to speak of, one that "calls for a fundamental transformation of our world."<sup>42</sup> He admits that this implicates anthropologists in "utopian aspirations," but he calls for these to be embodied in concrete projects of transformation. His utopian aspirations, then, embrace "a pessimism of the intellect," even while insisting on "a certain optimism of the spirit."<sup>43</sup>

If this strikes us as moving quickly toward some of the usual attitudes of spiritual or religious minds, our suspicion might be confirmed by some other signs in Farmer's work. That introductory chapter about Farmer's own life trajectory, his own "vital practice" of liminality, carries as its opening epitaph, the words of activist priest, Dan Berrigan: "One learns, I would hope, to discover what is right, what needs to be righted - through work, through action."<sup>44</sup> He writes of his own ways of embracing liberation theology's 'preferential option for the poor.'<sup>45</sup> In his 1994 book, The Uses of Haiti, Farmer devoted major discussions to the liberation theology of a priest working among the landless peasants of Haiti, with whom Farmer had cast his lot in Haiti in 1984.<sup>46</sup> In that book, too,

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 36.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 93.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 92-93.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 18, citing Daniel Berrigan, 1971.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>46</sup> Aristide was elected President of Haiti in 1990, and then forced into exile in 1991 by a U.S-supported military coup. He later returned to Haiti to complete his first term as President, and then in 2001 was re-elected to another term. See his recent book, Eyes of the Heart: Seeking a Path for the Poor in the Age of Globalization (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2000).

he summarized approvingly the theological work of Gustavo Gutierrez and his notion of the “preferential option for the poor.”<sup>47</sup> Farmer even adapted the title of one of Gutierrez’s books (The Power of the Poor in History) into one of his chapter titles, “The Power of the Poor in Haiti.”<sup>48</sup>

Before probing the anthropological significance of Farmer’s religious-like language and his frequent referencing of theological discourse, let us turn to another anthropological enterprise.

(Nancy Scheper-Hughes as Anthropologist-Diviner)

The 1987 article that Scheper-Hughes co-authored with Margaret Lock, “The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology,”<sup>49</sup> has had marked influence on both medical anthropology and anthropology of religion.<sup>50</sup> That essay was soon followed by her 1992 magisterial work in ethnography entitled Death Without Weeping, highly awarded by both the Latin American Studies Association and the Society of Medical Anthropology. The book was the product of fieldwork done in the mid-1960s while working as a health practitioner for the peace corps, and then later during four field-trips between 1982 and 1989. She is Professor of Anthropology, at the University of California, Berkeley.

In the 568 pages of Death Without Weeping, Scheper-Hughes displays an anthropologist at work in constructing the cultural world of the shanty town people of Alto do Cruzeiro (“the Alto”) in Bom Jesus of Northeast Brazil. The book is grand in its sweep and complex in detail, but the mainlines of her construction are these. First, she portrays the people in the shanty town of the Alto as living in a cultural world made up of three intersecting realms of social reality. One is the realm of the casa grande, the big house, signifying all those meanings and practices by which the people

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<sup>47</sup> Farmer, The Uses of Haiti, 48, 55, 143, 256, 259.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 143-76. Farmer followed with another chapter, “The Coup of 1991: The Power of the Rich in Haiti.”

<sup>49</sup> Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock, “The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology,” Medical Anthropology Quarterly 1 no. 1 (1987): 6-41.

<sup>50</sup> The Scheper-Hughes/Lock essay is cited at a significant point in Bowie’s treatise on anthropology and body-boundaries in religious and cultural perspective. See Fiona Bowie, The Anthropology of Religion (London: Basil Blackwell, 2000), 88. Cf. Byron J. Good, Medicine, Rationality and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 58, 194, 200n.1.



still interact with “the remaining feudal world of the plantation,” the world of the “sugarocracy” that dominated the Nordeste (the Northeast) in Brazil. The second realm is that of the rua, the street, which signifies for Scheper-Hughes peoples’ connection to contemporary worlds of industry and transnational commerce. Third, there is the realm of the mata, the forest or countryside, which signifies the “precapitalist, rural world” from which shanty-town residents have come, and in Alto do Cruzeiro marks them negatively as matutos, “backward country people.”

In all three of these realms, the people of the shanty-town are on the downside of power, and this sense of struggling on the downside colors the entire cultural model she constructs of them. Their life amid weakness is a function of a past of rural subservience to the plantation, and now to the contemporary political economy. Today, in spite of several so-called “economic miracles” in Brazil, its Nordeste is, in Eduardo Galeano’s words, “a concentration camp for more than thirty million people.”<sup>51</sup> Scheper-Hughes adds that this is no mere literary hyperbole, given that the majority of that thirty million, rural workers or displaced persons and their families, have an average caloric intake that is less than that reported at the Buchenwald concentration camp of Nazi Germany.<sup>52</sup>

Being on the weak side of power means that all of life is seen by Alto people as a struggle, “a luta,” between weak and strong groups of people and between weaker and stronger forces within each person. Scheper-Hughes describes this luta as the “generative metaphor” that crops up everywhere. It then gives rise to a “rich folk conceptual scheme” that the people call Nervos, a schematic way of viewing their life as a “bundle of nerves,” a nervousness that is irritable, a taut and lean-in-the-extreme, all stemming from a continual, “free-floating, ontological, existential insecurity.”<sup>53</sup> Scheper-Hughes gives great detail to her mapping and discussion of this folk idiom, and her construction of this cultural world, through observation and interviews, enables her to come up with a detailed cultural “phenomenology of Nervos.”

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<sup>51</sup> Eduardo Galeano, Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 75.

<sup>52</sup> Scheper-Hughes, Death Without Weeping, 157.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 169.

In this phenomenology, weakness is the trait of the poor, the “little people” of the Alto; strength that of the rich, the “big people.” Weakness and strength are discussed in the Alto idiom as pertaining to both body and mind/head. [The weak body is of concern with its “sick blood,” wasted nerves, spoiled mother’s milk, wasted liver and impotence, all opposite to vitality, heat, potency and fertility. The weak mind/head is where meanings of *Nervos* take up themes of “spells, fits, madness, sadness, anxiety, infant fits, retardation, and so on.”<sup>54</sup> All this, of course, is in opposition to the mental traits they attribute to the strong, “big people:” intelligence, tranquility, courage, honor, purity, control, and balance.] The key to living on this phenomenological terrain is to guard and develop a “knack for survival,” what is called the quality of *forca* in men, and *fraqueza* in women. These suggest “an elusive, almost animistic constellation of strength, grace, beauty, and power, that triumphs.”<sup>55</sup>

Many, however, do not triumph, or at least do not do so in any traditional sense. Triumph for mothers, who are the special subject-matter and focus of the ethnography, usually means learning to let go of most of their children, performing an almost routine triage, emergency decision-making about the life or death of their children. The weaker children are sent off to death, away from the hard culture of the Alto, to become “Angel Babies” in heaven who are fitted into a reigning Roman Catholic mythos among Alto people, which views these babies as sacrificed for the sake of those who manage to go on living.<sup>56</sup> “Mother love” in the Alto, thus, is marked by the letting go of children, giving them over to “death without weeping.” This phrase, now the ethnography’s title, is from a poem, *Disparada*, by Geraldo Vandre: “I have seen death without weeping/The destiny of the Northeast is death/Cattle they kill/but to the people they do something worse.”<sup>57</sup>

With all these themes in place, Scheper-Hughes might be seen as poised to speak of a “culture of poverty,” in Oscar Lewis’s sense, which attributes to the impoverished an ideational

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 188ff.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> See the chapters on child-death and mother love, Ibid. 268-399.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. x. It should be noted that Scheper-Hughes also discusses a kind of “‘weeping with delight’ because the Lord had carried away her fifth child” (416ff).

scheme, simply to be respected as some “world of poor others.” Scheper-Hughes does not go that route. She does acknowledge that the cultural meanings that have constellated in a context of nervous hunger, make up Nervos, a folk idiom and a “somatic culture,” a “habitus,” she says elsewhere, which is a collection of “acquired habits and somatic tactics that represent the ‘cultural arts’ of using and being in the body and in the world.”<sup>58</sup> In the language of her essay on the “three bodies” of concern to medical anthropology, we can say that Nervos as somatic culture, is the “social body” in which suffering individual bodies find meaning. The culture, this “social body,” which she constructs among Alto people, is one that privileges the body and, in so doing, instructs them daily “in a close attention to physical senses and symptoms.”

Not surprisingly, Scheper-Hughes is driven to relate the Nervos idiom of the social body to her “third body,” i.e. the body politic. She relates the people’s idiom of Nervos to the “nervous hunger” that afflicts bodies as a result of their confinement within weakening structures created by the political economy. This articulation, however, is very complex. Even though she connects Nervos to the wider political context, she does not portray it as only a reflection of, or as a “mystification” of, the body politic, the political economy. The body politic is a wider, broader field of somatic forces that must be seen as backdrop for understanding the idiom of Nervos, but the idiom must also be respected, as having its own unity and integrity, primarily because it is part of “the life-ways” of Alto people, created and nurtured by them, but also because it is a way of resisting, or surviving, the external forces impinging upon them.

Thus, Scheper-Hughes is ambivalent about Nervos. On the one hand, she calls it a kind of “collective delusion” that the sick-poor of the Alto have and which, for her, is “painful to witness.” She even spent some time in a cultural center challenging women of the Alto about their phenomenology of beliefs about weakness and power, and finding their resistance to the idea that Nervos might be a reaction to “nervous hunger.” On the other hand, she respects it, first, because it is a valuable mode of survival built up around necessary practices of triage that express one’s “knack for survival;” and second, because it is an idiom that “allows hungry, irritable, and angry

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 185.

*Nordestinos* a “safe” way to express and register their anger and discontent.”<sup>59</sup> Union organizing and other protest modalities have proven - over decades of threats, forced disappearances and death squad formation - to be very *unsafe* ways to express anger and resistance. Nervos, their cultural idiom, provides a safer mode of resistance to the political economy that drives them down.<sup>60</sup>

Scheper-Hughes, like Farmer, in sum, features an anthropology that works the conjuncture between the construction of a cultural world (here, of Nervos), and the awareness and theorizing of extreme upheaval (here, a political economy that steepes majorities in deepening and deadly poverty). It is hardly surprising that within this conjuncture, her own religious-like language again abounds. In part, this is because of Scheper-Hughes’ own Catholic background, which resonated with the Catholicism practiced in the Alto. (Like Alto people, she would instinctively make the sign of the cross amid danger or misfortune.<sup>61</sup>)

This is not only a matter of her background, however; Scheper-Hughes was also invited and challenged to participate in the religious mindset and structures by the people she studied. This gave added impetus to her tendency to embrace, as at least partly her own, several of the religious languages and practices of the people she studied. She was challenged by her informants to participate in their world, in their luta. In fact, at the end of her first of four anthropological field trips, Alto residents told her that when she returned the next time she would have to “be” with them in their luta, and not just ‘sit idly by’ taking fieldnotes.” They taunted her, “What is this anthropology anyway to us?”<sup>62</sup>

She thus participated in such projects as the “ecclesiastical base community,” an informal Catholic dialogue center which had many of the aims of liberation theology using Paolo Freire’s notion of conscientizacao, the nurturing of critical consciousness in poor communities.<sup>63</sup> In the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 195.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 213-15.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 29.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 8, 49, 170-72, 390, 514.

circles of these communities and elsewhere, she raised her own critical questions, about Nervos's relation to nervous hunger, about beliefs in "angel babies," and about mothers' attitudes toward their dying and dead children.

While she vigorously criticizes Latin American liberation theology for its hostility toward female sexuality and reproduction, and for its silence about the church's role in perpetuating the useless suffering of mothers and infants, Scheper-Hughes is a vigorous participant in the structures and critical consciousness of liberation theology in the Alto. She summarizes approvingly its Christian hymns to liberation, its radical praxis that organizes street demonstrations for the poor, and its priests who tell of a "new church," hostile to the wealthy and strong, making an "Exodus" toward new lands and freedom from want for the weak and suffering of today.<sup>64</sup>

For this paper, what is of particular concern is not so much the phenomenon of liberation theology in the Alto, but the way Scheper-Hughes' participation in its praxis, enters her anthropological practice. As to any religious-like sensibilities she shows, we might consider again the notion of liminality.

Unlike Farmer, she does not use the notion of "liminality" to characterize her anthropological practice. There is, nevertheless, a type of liminal space, a "being suspended betwixt-and-between," which, for her as anthropologist, she goes on to elaborate in religious-like terms. The liminal space I have in mind is that of the anthropologist-self in encounter with the studied other. That space is both a field of knowledge and a field of action, where the writing of the others' cultural worlds derives not just from observation, but also from participation in shared projects of nurture, support and even resistance.

She speaks of this role here as that of "anthropologist-diviner," naming wounds and broken taboos, the deadly words, and human weaknesses that lead to suffering. She refers to the aware and critical medical anthropologist as an interpretive "hand-trembler," discerning the diseased organs and maybe also pointing out where social healing, resistance and liberation lie.<sup>65</sup> She even ends her study of Nervos by calling for a "liberation medicine," which would see the tragic whole of life in

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 517-33, esp. 519.

<sup>65</sup> Scheper-Hughes, Death Without Weeping, 26.

every face of sufferers who enter a clinic, or who are forced to forge their cultural ways amid places like the Alto. That, she says, would be a “liberation medicine, a new medicine, like a new theology, fashioned out of hope.”<sup>66</sup>

The first task of such a liberation medicine might be to cease rationalizing the Nervos folk idiom in the Alto, as do, she documents, many of the professional clinicians and political leaders in Brazil. Nervos often is exploited by leaders and clinicians, who do not link Nervos to nervous hunger. For to admit the daily onslaught of hunger, would be to admit a widespread problem of the social order that is kept hidden, often from even the sufferers who call it, merely, overall weakness. And so, traditional medicine, and complicit anthropologists, often only tranquilize the hungry with drugs. They do not feed the hungry, which would meet their real requirements. Indeed, she says, in the Alto, “medicine, even more than religion, comes to actualize the Marxist platitude on the drugging of the masses.”<sup>67</sup>

Her mode of moral advocacy, expressed in her pursuit of liberation medicine, she also describes as “almost theological.” In what sense? To answer, she turns to the compelling quest to be “with and for the other.” Anthropology is a practice of being drawn into “spaces of human life where she or he might really prefer not to go at all. . . .”<sup>68</sup> In another place, she becomes even more specific about why anthropology is like theology.

If theology entails a ‘leap of faith’ of oneself toward an invisible, unknowable Divine Other, anthropology implies an “outside-of-myself” leap toward an equally unknown and opaque other-than-myself, and a similar sort of reverential awe before the unknown one is called for.<sup>69</sup>

This language is reminiscent of that found in her interview with Harry Kreisler, where she described

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 237 [check page].

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 203.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. xii.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 24.

going “into the field as an ecstatic experience.”<sup>70</sup> Lest we make too much of some idea of “fieldwork as mystical practice,” we do well to turn now and address more carefully the notion of the religious in anthropology.

#### RELIGION AMONG THE MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS

The title of this subsection recalls the title of an essay by British social anthropologist, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, “Religion Among the Anthropologists.” In that essay, after noting how many anthropologists approached the study of religion as largely something to reject (as unsophisticated folk anthropology, as superstition, or as illusion, et al), he noted that the overall tone among anthropologists toward religion had been “bleakly hostile.”<sup>71</sup> This is certainly not the case in the anthropological practice of Farmer and Scheper-Hughes. Perhaps this is due to the fact that medical anthropologists are more prone to attend to the important functions of spiritual or religious symbolics, which often are interlaced with peoples’ illness representations. Perhaps also, to recall Kleinman’s opening quote about the “new era” in ethnography, contemporary medical anthropologists are being pushed to examine religious language, both critically and sympathetically, because they increasingly find themselves working that conjuncture between discerning cultural worlds and reflecting on extreme upheaval.

What are we to make of the religious-like terminology (liminality, liberation, theology, diviner, “preferential option for the poor,” et al) in Farmer’s and Scheper-Hughes’s inter-cultural work? By describing the terminology as “religious-like,” I make clear that this terminology gives no grounds for discerning here a religion, or even suggests that these inter-cultural research programs are somehow dependent upon the religions.

We might wish to switch terms and speak of a “spiritual” dimension in anthropological hermeneutic, but though that has some advantages, it is still problematic. The advantages are that we would gain a term for this dimension of human cultural work and research, which is not fraught with all the heavy meanings often associated with religion (belief in supernatural beings, elaborated

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<sup>70</sup> Harry Kreisler, “Habits of a Militant Anthropologist: Conversations with Nancy Scheper-Hughes” (Berkeley: Regents of the University of California, 2000), at <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/edu/people/Scheper-Hughes/sh-con1.html>.

<sup>71</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, “Religion Among the Anthropologists,” Blackwell (1960).

rites with attendant cultos and mythos, etc.). In addition, the notions of spirit, spiritual and spirituality, connote, in English at least, a kind of pervasive, inchoate presence, which however elusive, receives a more frequent acknowledgment and respect. The major problem, though, is that using the new term merely shifts the locus of our search for understanding to another term, here “the spiritual” instead of “the religious.” We still face the task of identifying features that constitute “the spiritual.”

In my own work, I have written essays, using the notions of spirit and spiritual, seeking also to specify what the meaning of those terms might be.<sup>72</sup> Here, however, largely because anthropologists have written so much on the notion of religion, I would like to stay with the term, religious. In what senses, might we use that term to refer to the religious-like discourse of the medical anthropologists I’ve examined? To respond to that question, we do well to draw from some analysts of the rhetoric of epistemological argument, such as philosopher Stephen Toulmin, who analyzes the interpretive practices of even the most reasoned, empirically-oriented and objectivist thinkers.

According to Toulmin, under various types of research conditions, where inquirers undergo acute tension and trauma (personal crisis, exposure to disease, political conflict, various modes of global injustice), a kind of “limit-language” then emerges in their discourse. The limit-language enters - more or less consciously, more or less coherently - when, as here, anthropologists, are “pressed to their limits,” (as we say in English), or sense the limits and limitations of their ordinary modes of discourse. Limit-language tends to be found when discourse is pressed to examine the furthest horizons of anthropologists’ discourse, often only presupposed and tacitly acknowledged, but rarely examined.

In the case of Farmer and Scheper-Hughes, and we can hold this as a hypothesis that may or may not pertain to other medical anthropologists, when they construct cultural worlds in relation to “extreme upheaval” (deepening global inequality as in Farmer, or growing tendencies of the

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<sup>72</sup> Mark Lewis Taylor, “Tracking Spirit: Theology as Cultural Critique in America,” in Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis, edited by Sheila Greeve Davaney and Dwight N. Hopkins. (New York and London: Routledge, 1997). Cf. Mark Taylor, “ ‘Spirit’ in the Researching of Cultural Worlds,” in Anthropology and Theology: God, Icons, and God-Talk (Lanham, MD: University Press of America), 33-45.



political economy to worsen women's hunger and poverty, as in Scheper-Hughes) they deploy a "limit-language" that borrows from discourses usually thought to be religious. But we must ask, "religious" in what sense, and "usually thought to be religious," by whom?

I will be suggesting that even in terms of anthropologists' own understandings of the religious, as they have critically examined it in various cultural settings, we can speak of the limit-languages of Farmer and Scheper-Hughes as "religious-like." There are four senses in which this is the case.

1. Farmer's and Scheper-Hughes's joint interest in liminality can be seen as a "religious-like" dimension of their discourses against the backdrop of Victor Turner's theories of liminality in religious and ritual life. For Turner, liminality referred to a view of sacredness attaching to moments of transition in Ndembu ritual processes, which he then extended to nearly every other cultural sphere in modern society.<sup>73</sup> The liminal (from *limen*, "threshold") is a time of transition and chaos, a state of the opportune in which ambiguity and danger are specters, a particular kind of concrete presence in which intensified in-betweenness produces "a moment in and out of time." In such processes as these people tend to be clothed by themselves and their communities with the languages of danger, taboo, magic, the sacred.

Public crises in the contemporary world, almost anywhere, are liminal in that they constitute, says Turner, "a threshold between more or less stable phases of the social process." Again, this is not religion "hedged around by taboos and thrust away from the centers of public life." Instead, "it [the liminal] takes up its menacing stance in the forum itself and, as it were, dares the representatives of order to grapple with it."<sup>74</sup>

When medical anthropologists construct cultural worlds where illness is represented, in relation to the "extreme upheaval" and violent processes of the present era, Turner's approach to a religious, sacred, or spiritual dimension proves especially important. In the conjuncture of

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<sup>73</sup> Victor Turner, Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society (London and Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974). For Turner's earlier work, see the now nearly classic, The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969).

<sup>74</sup> Turner, Dramas, Fields and Metaphors, 39.

culture-making and awareness of extreme upheaval, anthropologists may themselves move into liminal spaces.

Farmer and Scheper-Hughes each depend on the notion of liminality relation to clarifying the overall meanings of their anthropological enterprises. For Farmer, liminality is explicitly appropriated as a vital transitional state in his personal and professional work, not only as he works along the Haiti/Harvard axis, but also and especially in that conjuncture between interpreting cultures and interpreting the global inequalities traveled by infectious disease today.

For Scheper-Hughes, as we've seen, while the term, liminality, is not explicitly applied by her to her own personal and professional work, her depictions of anthropological practice and theory, involve all the main features of Turner's theory of liminality. This is especially true of her interview comments about "the ecstasy" of fieldwork, about anthropologists' own "hunter and gatherer" role as seeker of human values, marginalized from her own cultural world, thus wandering on pilgrimage, as it were, between and among cultures. It is especially in this being betwixt-and-between one's own world and that of others that Scheper-Hughes invokes her limit-language, where anthropology is further likened to theology. It is a being thrown toward the other which is analogous, for her, to the being thrown in faith toward God.

**2. There is another important trait of Farmer's and Scheper-Hughes's limit-languages, their reaching for integrative and holistic perspectives, and it can be viewed as religious-like in terms of Clifford Geertz's anthropological understanding of religion.** Geertz's analysis of religion as a system of meaningful symbols (which then has other traits as well) throws the focus on meaningful wholes, comprehensive paradigms and world views. In all these notions, the religious is assumed to concern the process of whole-making, the spinning of webs of meaning. The religious sensibility is, above all, integrative, and involves the making of connections.<sup>75</sup>

This is clearly present in Farmer and Scheper-Hughes, and their limit-languages often emphasize this point. From their liminal vantage points, both are in search of a new ethos, cultivating an integrative sense in their studies. The liminal is not simply a drifting between worlds, but also is the discovery of richer, more textured and encompassing networks. The

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<sup>75</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973) [1966], 87-125, and excerpted most recently in Lambek, 61-82.

integrative sense is expressed, of course, in their interest in constructing a “world,” a cultural whole, that they attribute to the peoples they study. This is evident in Farmer’s portrayal of a Haitian “cultural model” that unites various paradigms for interpreting AIDS, and evident also in Scheper-Hughes’s analysis of the “folk idiom” of Nervos.

This, though, is a typical move of anthropological theory-making. Farmer and Scheper-Hughes push further, however, with their own integrative sense. Not only are studied peoples seen to be operating with holistic world views; so also do Farmer and Scheper-Hughes work from and toward the shaping of an integrative world view. They seek to articulate these, and urge their colleagues to work integratively as well.

Recall, that Farmer, especially, portrays his anthropology and medical work as entailing a “quest for connections.”<sup>76</sup> His studies of AIDS and tuberculosis brought knowledge of similarities that emboldened no easy discourse of “universals,” but still an awareness of significant similarities of human interest that extend across cultural boundaries. In fact, it was the liminal shuttling between Haiti and Boston that provoked, alongside awareness of difference, a sense of culture transcending similarities. This integrative sense leads him not only to global studies of political economy, but also, in a still more encompassing way, to a vision within which his own values merge with his knowledge and experience, into his advocated agenda for the future. This is that “alternative vision,”<sup>77</sup> born of “utopian aspirations.”

In Scheper-Hughes’s case, the integrative reach is also evident in the dramatic synthesis of so many experiential and conceptual dimensions in Death Without Weeping. That work oscillates between ethnographic detail and the grand sweep of history, uniting studies of medicine and religion with culture, daring even to posit unities of belief and human solidarity between inquiring ethnographers and their studied “others.” She herself characterizes her book in grand, at times sweeping ways, as a “voyage and discovery,” a “Christian passion play,” a “quest story.”<sup>78</sup>

A quest for what? For a “communal grail,” she says. This is an interesting metaphor,

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<sup>76</sup> Farmer, Infections and Inequalities, 23, 125-26.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 36.

<sup>78</sup> Scheper-Hughes, Death Without Weeping, 30.

playing off the notion of the “Holy Grail” and substituting in the place of the “Holy,” the term “communal.”<sup>79</sup> The substitution is arresting because at the same time that the term “Holy” is displaced, the “communal” is put in the place of the holy, suggesting its own status as holy - even if it is a more concrete, earthy, human mode of connectional “holiness.” There is operative here in Scheper-Hughes’s work, an ideal of human integrative connection writ large, encompassing many cultures, breaking through the divides of class, race and gender injustice. She gives it an extra rhetorical flourish, one typical of “limit-language,” when she also confesses to her envisioning a future marked by a “roundtable” for humanity, “a great Bakhtinian banquet where everyone can find a place at the table and share in the feasting.”<sup>80</sup>

It is this integrative reach that is operative also, it seems to me, in the influential essay she co-authored with Margaret Lock, “The Mindful Body.” A significant part of her challenge in that article, arises from a unity that she posits and develops within a conceptual vision that encompasses meanings pertaining to the individual body self, the social body, and the body politic. This unity is a dramatic integrative reach, enabling her to envision and theorize notions like a “political economy of the emotions.”<sup>81</sup>

3. While working the conjuncture of cultural studies and extreme upheaval, Farmer and Scheper-Hughes also display a tendency to both heed and develop **morally compelling sensibilities** that emerge from practices of power and constraint - practices they observe and those in which they participate. This tendency to moral judgment in anthropologists’ limit-language as a sign of religious-like tendencies, resonates with another anthropological’ approach to the study of the religious, that of Talal Asad.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> See her chapter 9, “Our Lady of Sorrows: A Political Economy of the Emotions,” Ibid, 400-445. A key passage shows the conceptual fruitfulness of her integrative reach: “Emotion work, to borrow a felicitous phrase from Arlie Hochschild (1979), puts the mindful body at the service of the body politic. North American women are no different from the Brazilian women of the Alto in “producing” sentiments that respond to hidden political agendas and that are useful to the “state” of things. Emotions are both personal, deeply private events and public, ideological constructs, as the rhetoric of mother love, and its absense, illustrates” (412).

In his Genealogies of Religion, Asad is critical of almost any attempt to render an anthropological “definition of religion,” and offers no new anthropological definition to replace the ones he criticizes, such as Clifford Geertz’s proposal which he sees as idealizing and essentializing. Asad criticizes Geertz and others for producing ideational definitions of religion, which overlook what Western religious practitioners speak of a religion’s binding character, a character that is at the heart of the term’s etymology (from the Latin stem, *leig*, “to bind). Augustine gives evidence of this connection in his admonition, “Let our religion bind us to the one omnipotent God, . . .”.<sup>82</sup> Asad quotes Augustine, less to track the latter’s compliance with the etymology of *religio* (“to bind” humans to the gods) and more to emphasize that Augustine’s and most Western practices of religion have been bound up with disciplina, law, sanctions, the shaping of moral practices, the forbidding, denying, and excluding of others.<sup>83</sup> Asad insists that the religious can never be reified, set above or thought apart, from the social discourses that are about authorization of power, the powerful social “binding” of bodies. Only this kind of analysis, which analyzes beliefs and practices, which that are given morally compelling force, enables study of what “religion” has actually been, i.e. a set of social practices entailing moral judgment and compelling force.<sup>84</sup>

To be sure, Farmer and Hughes do not exemplify a kind of “hard moralism” we might identify in much of the history of Western churches, nor do they endorse systematic practices that use force to compel behavior and desired outcomes. Nevertheless, they are both implicated, for

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<sup>82</sup> Augustine, Of True Religion, trans. H. S. Burleigh. (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964), 106.

<sup>83</sup> Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,” in Lambek, 114-32, esp. pages 119-20. Cf. Talal Asad, The Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>84</sup> A similar instance, on the need to study religion as always entailed in social practices of power and empowerment, together with the way powers are morally reinforced, has been emphatically and cogently argued by feminist theories of religion. See, for example, Carol P. Christ, “Mircea Eliade and the Feminist Paradigm Shift,” in Darlene M. Juschka, editor, Feminism in the Study of Religion (New York: Continuum, 2001), 587-88.

better and worse, in an advocacy of moral judgments and positions, which they themselves feel incumbent upon them, and which they propose as imperatives for others. I say this is for better, in that most of us would concur that the aims of redressing and reducing infectious disease, hunger, malnutrition and everyday violence against women, warrant strong advocacy and maybe also the taking of well-developed moral stands. It may at times, however, also be for worse, since the intensity of their advocacy risks, at times, driving the knowledge process in their research.

Here, I do not want so much to adjudicate between how their moral advocacies work for better or worse. I am more interested in noting how they each feature, in their limit-languages, a fragmentary discourse of moral obligation in anthropology, which situates them in continuity with one of the most characteristic features of religion as constructed in early modern Europe,<sup>85</sup> i.e. its interest in socially promoting morally compelling practices. Farmer and Schepher-Hughes are not the only anthropologists we could examine for evidence of moral advocacy in their discourse. When Christopher Taylor was preparing to write his second study, after his first study of Rwandan culture was overwhelmed by the extreme upheaval of 1994 genocide, he reported that an unnamed “distinguished senior anthropologist” urged Taylor on, saying, “You have a moral obligation to write this book.”

Given that both Farmer and Schepher-Hughes, like Taylor, work the conjuncture of constructing cultural worlds and extreme upheaval, it is not surprising to find a limit-language brimful of moral judgment. In fact, it is almost too easy to find that in their work, if we recall my previous portraits of their anthropologies. Farmer speaks of the “awesome responsibility”<sup>86</sup> of medical anthropologists and clinicians to study and critique today’s political economy, to not just do “the cultural piece” that transnational corporate funders often assign to the anthropologist, and to which they often also want to limit “their” anthropologists. The power of medicine stems, Farmer says elsewhere, from “the power of moral suasion.”<sup>87</sup> He talks about “the moral claims on all” who have responsibility of treating the destitute sick, those who have tuberculosis, to cite just

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<sup>85</sup> Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,” 121ff.

<sup>86</sup> Farmer, Infections and Inequalities, 282.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* 272.

one of the “modern plagues” of our time.<sup>88</sup> He presses further for what he also calls a “uniform ethic that should become [in spite of sure opposition from many pharmaceutical companies] a condition for pharmaceutical companies’ entry into any national and international marketplace, so that publicly funded research is not siphoned away for private gain or handicapped for the benefit of private-sector companies.”<sup>89</sup>

Other aspects of his limit-language entail moral discourse, but with a slightly different emphasis. Noting from Michael Taussig<sup>90</sup> that the “organizing realm of moral concerns regularly lies “behind every reified disease theory in our society,” Farmer is especially concerned with ways the sick get blamed for their diseases. Thus, the anthropologist’s moral consciousness leads not just to his or her exercise of moral responsibility so as to achieve virtue or avoid blame; it is also to expose abusive systems’ role in creating disease and so remove some of the blame that is borne wrongly by the sufferers. The last page of his book, carries a quote from Pierre Bourdieu’s massive, thousand-page, La Misere du Monde: “allowing sufferers to discover the possible social causes of their suffering” might be for them “to be relieved of blame.”<sup>91</sup>

Scheper-Hughes’s limit-language also abounds with discourse of moral advocacy that she seeks to propound with compelling force. Amid the moral lives of the people of the Alto, she devotes an entire chapter to the “double ethic” of all the people in the town of Bom Jesus, in which the Alto do Cruzeiro shanty town is situated. This double ethic involves a tension between an

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid. xviii. “An estimated three million people are dying each year from tuberculosis,” notably among young adults (3). In Russia and other countries from the former Soviet Union, for example, there is a “massive pandemic of MDTRB” tuberculosis, which is becoming even more massive “with minimal public comment and even less public action” (208). In part, the pandemic is due to “institutional amplification inside prisons and detention centers” (313n17). Farmer continues, “As Russia’s epidemic of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis continues to grow, wealthy Scandinavia- and eventually other parts of Europe - will be hard-pressed to argue that the treatment of the disease is not ‘cost-effective’ in Russia” (55).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. xxvii.

<sup>90</sup> Michael Taussig, “Reification and the Conscience of the Patient.” Social Science and Medicine 148. no.1 (1980): 3-13, page 7. Cited in Farmer, Infections and Inequalities, 182.

<sup>91</sup> Farmer, Infections and Inequalities, 282. Citing Pierre Bourdieu, La Misere du Monde. (Paris: Seuil, 1993), 944 (translation by Farmer).

“egalitarian and collectivist” ethic, on the one hand, and a “hierarchical and dyadic” ethic on the other.<sup>92</sup> Her concern with morality and ethics in the Alto, are also clearly evident in her fascinating summary of “triage” as part of Alto mothers’ “moral reasoning.” This selecting out of some children for life and the letting go of others, poses a moral crisis, that enables Scheper-Hughes to critique Carol Gilligan’s reflections on a womanly “ethic of care” and Sara Ruddick’s notion of “maternal thinking.”<sup>93</sup>

What is of particular interest to this paper, however, is the way the “muted moral voices of women” of the Alto interact with Scheper-Hughes’s own moral sensibility, and lead her to reflect on the nature of the moral sense in anthropological practice. She regularly faults anthropological studies for a kind of cultural relativism that dissolves all capacity to make judgments and develop standards, which are necessary for critically assessing and then resisting the violence done to women and to those suffering from nervous hunger.<sup>94</sup> Scheper-Hughes argues that ethical judgments are not just culturally mediated, with cultural conditions seen as the soil from which specific moral judgments of people have their origin. No, for her, “the ethical is always prior to culture.”<sup>95</sup> Her argument for this very complex claim, unfortunately, is developed in only the briefest of manners. Her basic sense, though, is that with the ethical is given “all sense and meaning,” and thus the ethical comes before cultural description and theorizing. She cites, briefly, Emmanuel Levinas: “Morality does not belong to culture: it enables one to judge it.”<sup>96</sup> Then she expands in her own words:

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<sup>92</sup> See chapter 3, “Reciprocity and Dependency: The Double Ethic of Bom Jesus,” in Scheper-Hughes, Death Without Weeping, 98-127, especially p. 98.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 102 (on triage as “moral reasoning in the Alto”), 361-64 (on Ruddick), 403-06 (on Gilligan). Cf. Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), and Sara Ruddick, Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

<sup>94</sup> Scheper-Hughes, on “an untenable cultural relativism,” Death Without Weeping, 21.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 22.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 22-3. Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” in Collected Philosophical Papers (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 100.



Accountability, answerability to “the other” - the ethical as I am defining it here - is “precultural” in that human existence always presupposes the presence of another. That I have been “thrown” into human existence at all presupposes a given, moral relationship to an original (m)other and she to me.<sup>97</sup>

It is precisely this kind of ethical sense, this accountability to the (m)other, this thrownness toward the other, that is both moral and marked with quasi-religious language. Indeed, it is understood by her as analogous to a life of faith in a “theological” sense,<sup>98</sup> she says, because her ethical orientation toward “the other-than-oneself” is a being thrown toward the unknown. Anthropological knowledge of the cultural “(m)other” of the Alto demands a leap into the unknown, toward an “opaque other-than-myself,” as she says, which also calls for a “reverential awe before the unknown.”<sup>99</sup> Here again, a moral sense that is compelling for the anthropologist, is propounded as compelling and demanding upon her readers’ moral sensibilities. Indeed, the moral sense is so strongly experienced by her as compelling, that she marks it with the spiritually-loaded language of “reverential awe,” or “like theology.”

4. Finally, I want to consider the limit-languages of Farmer and Scheper-Hughes as religious in terms of anthropologist’s discussions of the religious as “**liberatory**.” By liberatory, I mean the way religious language and practice entails, assumes or advocates, a sense of concrete freedom. In his Reader in the Anthropology of Religion, Michael Lambek observes that religion as studied by anthropologists is often understood as addressing states of disorder.<sup>100</sup> Religion and its rituals are often found as having their meaning and effect in their being about rebellion, reversal, or inversion of compulsory social norms. A host of cultural studies by anthropologists show the presence of religious life in “symbols of inversion,” such as those used in carnevalesque spaces,

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 23.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Lambek, 243.

or others that challenge dominant socio-cultural orders.”<sup>101</sup> On this view, the religious, then, in the language of Roberto da Matta, is the festive practice of “licensed release,” i.e. a release from the pressures of oppressive social, cultural, political and economic orders.<sup>102</sup> The release in question could be extended, I think, to refer to relief experienced, desired, yearned for, from illness and disease, which afflict, of course, not only individual bodies as such, but these as also inscribed in and shaped by, social bodies and the bodies politic. Religious language and symbolics, in many ways, then, seek to redress the disorder and suffering borne by subordinated peoples on the underside of hegemonic power.

Something like this is certainly operative in the anthropological practices of Farmer and Scheper-Hughes. Both are attracted to the religious discourse of Christian liberation theology, not only because the communities they study have embraced it to significant degree, but also because liberation symbolics give expression to their own anthropological practice of navigating the construction of cultural worlds amid the extreme upheaval being worked by today’s political economy. Both Farmer and Scheper-Hughes are well aware that Christian liberation theology in Latin America has failed to address the “praxis” needs of poor women, of indigenous communities, of racially marked peoples of African descent. Liberation theology, however, remains for them a potent source of a symbolics of reversal, which they value for expressing their own resistance to the hegemonic practices that inscribe and enforce a global economic apartheid. Liberation theology, from an anthropological perspective, is a Christian version of the symbolics of inversion amid hegemonic disorder. Its “preferential option for the poor,” which presents divine love and power as prioritizing the needs of the poor, is fertile ground for a symbolics of inversion and reversal. The reversal is evident in well-known New Testament passages: “Blessed are the poor,” or “The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.” In liberation theology, there abounds a religious language and, often, religious practices, that licence release for the struggling poor.

Farmer understandably, therefore, displays in his limit-language a marked interest in

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>102</sup> Cited in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, “The Politics and Poetics of Transgression,” in Lambek, 285.

liberation theology. It is a tradition he and his colleagues worked out of and in support of.<sup>103</sup> He “cast his lot” with the peasants’ dynamic priests who took up liberation theology in Haiti.<sup>104</sup> More importantly perhaps, he takes in the notion of liberation spirituality, that of “solidarity with the poor,” and builds it into his own preferred mode of anthropological practice, which he names “programmatically solidarity,” i.e. “solidarity that acknowledges and responds to the material needs of the destitute sick” and which engages “not only local inequalities but also global ones.”<sup>105</sup> This social justice is, for Farmer, not ancillary to research in medicine and medical anthropology; it is “a dimension that must be built into all human research.”<sup>106</sup>

Scheper-Hughes also harbors a basic respect for the liberation theology in the Alto, and finds her own way to embrace it in her anthropological practice. She, perhaps, is more cautious than Farmer, because she elaborates on its failures, especially in its neglect and weakening of poor women’s reproductive rights, freedom and dignity. In her culminating chapter of Death Without Weeping, however, she portrays liberation theology in positive terms. It seeks and builds “the festive community,” celebrating reversals, organizing for change, always present to help “build consciousness.”

She cautions against any easy waxing eloquent about liberation theology as a discourse of resistance, because its resistance is so often, broken, divided, or hard to discern at all. Nevertheless she does find the Alto people enabled by liberation theology and its festivals of licensed release. There is both release and relief in the festival symbolics of liberatory practice. Even if this practice does not always sustain people’s ability to resist, it can sustain their will to exist, and that, to Scheper-Hughes, is significant. “In the context of these besieged lives,” she says, “I find human resilience enough to celebrate with them, joyfully and hopefully, if always tentatively.”

Her support for liberatory discourse - and recall also her own advocacy of a “liberation

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<sup>103</sup> Farmer, Infections and Inequalities, 25.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 19.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. 92.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. xxv.

medicine” that is “like a new theology, fashioned out of hope”<sup>107</sup> - might provoke our reconsideration of the way Scheper-Hughes proposed that the ethical is prior to culture, because being thrown toward the other was a precondition of studying the other. Both Farmer’s and Scheper-Hughes’s important emphasis on the liberatory, on the need to effect release from hegemonic disorder, exposes the importance of a liberatory or emancipatory interest in anthropology. We should note, however, that Scheper-Hughes’ much touted being thrown toward the other in “reverential awe” presupposes an interest in freedom, in being free from the cultural location into which the anthropologist himself or herself has already been thrown. It also presupposes that the cultural other toward which one is thrown, to continue Scheper-Hughes’ language, is free to remain unknown, and then also free to become known emically, freer from anthropologists’ first caricatures, first understandings, i.e. free to become a truly mutually-engageable other.<sup>108</sup>

Such a liberatory interest, which often has led anthropologists to assist their “informants” (the studied others) toward freedom from material suffering and amid political/economic strife is, in fact, often a very practical precondition for knowledge of the other as other.<sup>109</sup> In Robert Scholte’s terms, “the emancipatory interest, finally, makes the understanding of others possible.”<sup>110</sup> By an “emancipatory interest” he means that emancipation or liberation is an interest that is both condition and goal of knowledge. It is to pursue “knowledge for the sake of freedom.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Death Without Weeping, 215.

<sup>108</sup> This envisioned “mutual engageability” is often a pure projected fiction, since anthropologists rarely have engaged their studied peoples on the basis of mutually shared political and economic power. See Farmer, Infections and Inequalities, p. 6, and Scholte, 430-49.

<sup>109</sup> Anthropologist Christopher Taylor had to wrestle with this precondition. See Sacrifice as Terror, 1-32. For other examples, see Mark Taylor, “Religion, Cultural Plurality and Liberating Praxis,” The Journal of Religion 71, No. 2 (April 1991): 145-66, esp. pages 160-61.

<sup>110</sup> Bob Scholte, “Toward a Reflexive and Critical Anthropology,” in Reinventing Anthropology, edited by Dell Hymes (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 448.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* 451n.13.

Citing Gerard Radnitzsky, Scholte also notes that “Cultural anthropology, in seeking to understand the “significant other,” first entails an “alienation [from] ordinary self-understanding.” Radnitzsky continues: “the following condition must obtain: one is in a position, despite one’s history-boundedness, to philosophize from a platform that is not wholly bound to one’s historical [cultural] situation.”<sup>112</sup>

## CONCLUSION -

### THE “HOMOLOGY” IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES OF RELIGION

As I conclude, we can return to the second of the two salient concerns I noted about the crossroads of anthropology and religion, i.e. the one where I noted how anthropologists’ own understanding of, and response to, religion in their own cultural worlds, tends to be homologous to the way they study and respond to it as a phenomenon in other cultures. After journeying through Farmer’s and Scheper-Hughes’ “ethnographies of disordered states” (Kleinman), we found the tension between their constructing of cultural worlds and their confrontations with extreme upheaval to involve them in deployment of a limit-language that has “religious-like” characteristics - “religious” both in the sense of resonating with some common sense understandings of that term in Western culture, but also in the sense of being reminiscent of the approaches of major theorists in the anthropology of religion (Turner, Geertz, Asad, Lambek and others).

The four traits I have discussed in Farmer’s and Scheper-Hughes’s work - (1) liminality, (2) integrative vision, (3) morally compelling sensibilities, and (4) a liberatory sense<sup>113</sup> - do not

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<sup>112</sup> Gerard Radnitzsky, Continental Schools of Meta-Science (Goteborg: Akademiforlaget, 1967), 39 and 72 (emphasis added).

<sup>113</sup> Some readers may note the absence here, if they have not already noted it before, of any mention, in my discussion of religion, of peoples’ discourse about “supernatural beings” or “spiritual beings.” As Fiona Bowie notes (22-23) such discourse has been viewed, among early ethnologists like Edward B. Tylor, or more recent ones like Melford Spiro, as essential to cross-cultural “definitions” of the religious. (See E. B. Tylor, Religion in Primitive Culture, reprint of volume 2 of Tylor, 1871. New York: Harper & Row, 1958, page 8; and Melford Spiro, “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation,” in Michael Banton, editor, Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion. ASA Monographs 3. London: Tavistock Publications, 1973, 96.)

Should not the language of spiritual beings or supernatural beings be, at least, listed as an essential defining trait of religious phenomena? The problem is that it really doesn’t solve the

constitute a new anthropological “definition of religion.” Fiona Bowie is right, I think, to insist in her The Anthropology of Religion (2000) that the phenomena that scholars often approach as “religious” (whether in religious studies or in anthropology, sociology, or psychology), are so diverse and shifting in their meanings, that we do well not to settle for one all-encompassing definition.<sup>114</sup> I would propose, however, that the four traits discussed here might provide a set of “family resemblances” (Wittgenstein) among phenomena that often have been constructed by scholars as “religious,” when they have negotiated meanings for that term derived from their experiences of religion in their own societies and from their more disciplined study of it in other societies. At best, the four traits, the family resemblances among religious phenomena, can provide a working definition, a provisional orientation, to guide us as we approach cultural worlds in search of understandings of “religion.”

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problem of delimiting a notion of the religious. We would still have the problem of discerning what makes beings “spiritual” or “supernatural.” To make a notion of the spiritual or supernatural a mark of beings or phenomena that are religious, presupposes a “spiritual/material” or “supernatural/natural” divide that many cultures and peoples do not make, especially throughout Africa and indigenous America. Thus, we would be significantly limiting the cross-cultural scope within which we might find religious phenomena. When people speak about spiritual or supernatural beings it is best not to take this tendency in itself as the key mark of the religious, but as one way to manifest religious sensibilities marked by the four traits I have here proposed. People may express their religious sensibilities in stories and beliefs about spiritual and supernatural beings, but also through expressions, which are just as important, centering around wind, soil, gravity, various dynamic forces, or around trees, hawks, crows, and woodpeckers.

In short, if we are going to keep the word, “religious,” as a serviceable term that functions with broad cross-cultural viability, it should refer to a range of expressions that is more encompassing than the monotheistic patterns that make religion about one “highest being” (a largely “masculinist symbolic of the West undergirded by a concept of God as Divine Father,” writes Grace Jantzen, Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion, Manchester University Press, 1998, page 10), and also more encompassing than supernaturalistic and spiritualistic patterns that assume religion to be about dividing nature from a supernatural, or the material and ordinary from the spiritual, and then placing some beings onto a separate and higher plane. The study of discourses about supernatural and spiritual beings within religious and anthropological studies is, of course, important; but we need not take those discourses as providing the key mark of the wider phenomenon of religious discourse and experience.

<sup>114</sup> Bowie, 25.

Moreover, I tend to think that we will have a greater likelihood of scholarly consensus about phenomena being “religious,” to the extent that we can discern in those phenomena not just one of the traits I have foregrounded, but several, if not all, of them, insofar as they may be overlapping and interplaying in the phenomena we take to be religious. I have not been able to argue this additional claim here in this paper; it would have to be tested in a number of fieldwork situations and cases.

Whether the four traits are found to overlap or not, allow me briefly, in closing, to note how each of the four traits discerned in Farmer and Scheper-Hughes, and in conversation with the anthropologists of religion I have examined, might resonate with phenomena we encounter in the field.

Guided by the trait of *liminality*, we might find the religious in a variety of transitional and “threshold” (Latin *limen*) situations. This may take us into scrutiny of such “boundary situations” (Karl Jaspers) as between self and other, the human body and the natural environment, rural and urban experiences, phases of ritual (puberty, marriage, funerals), the mysterious transition that birth is as well as death, the skin as border between the body’s inside and outside, the dusk and the dawn that mark the boundaries between night and day, the contrasts between the seen and the unseen, and accompanying posited worlds of “this world” and other worlds, the normal and the extranormal - all these are boundary situations, with our thoughts and lives hovering, as it were, on various thresholds, vibrant with liminal sensibility, language (myth, folktale, story, sometimes even “theology”) and ritual. It may be a site of the religious.

Guided by the trait of *integrative vision*, we might find the religious in peoples’ reach for encompassing wholes and new unities. These may be found in the unities of past and present horizons that people construct through memory and rituals of remembrance. The past and present horizons may also be fused with a future horizon. Maybe the integrative vision lies in the apprehension, often tacitly, of a “total social fact” (Marcel Mauss) that links all the spheres and realms of culture into a whole, and then also human “culture” with “nature.” An integrative reach works also through the cosmological imagination, where notions of earth and heaven are brought into some unity, or, as in Maya cosmology, where all 7 or so heavens and 13 underworlds are thought to make up a holistic cosmos through which the living and the dead travel. Integrative

vision may be at work in interpretations of “the divine,” as given in Luce Irigaray and Elizabeth Grosz: “the field of creativity, fertility, production, an always uncertain and preempted field. . . a projection of the past into a future that gives the present new meaning and direction.”<sup>115</sup> Still again, integrative vision may lie in any of those ways people reach for some “ground” and orientation to make meaningful those elusive but still dreamed notions of a “common humanity” or “one world.”

Guided by the trait of *a morally-compelling sensibility*, we might seek out the religious in the processes by which practices of discipline and power construct communal normativity. The resultant norms, constituting a *habitus* wherein cultural meanings are patterned somatically (in bodily life), may be internally-sensed or owned, and/or also externally imposed or enforced. The senses of duty, of “being driven” to certain actions that are deemed approvable, in contrast to ones that are disapproved (perhaps, also marked as taboo), are areas of human life where discourses of the gods, of spiritual beings and forces are regularly deployed. Making judgments about, or complying with and resisting, the good and the bad, and to feel the difference between the two, is another site of the religious.

Finally, being guided by the trait of *a liberatory sense*, we may seek the religious in the various modes people devise for seeking redress amid imposed disorder, whether the disordered state is one imposed by forces and fates of nature, disease, or by the hegemonies of power like political tyranny, economic exploitation, patriarchal constraint and abuse, racial injustice. Sometimes the liberatory sense is carried in modes of redress such as revolutionary movements spawned by grassroots and mass organizations. Sometimes they are sparked by millenarian movements, or the carnivalesque festivals that seek a “licensed release” from socio-cultural norms. Here also we must include movements following healers from whom people seek relief and release from bodily suffering or the pains of finiteness, as well as others seeking “salvation” from various senses of confinement (to the “sin” and “evil” encountered in the self or in others).

Even if you and I are guided in our field research into religious phenomena by these traits, which I have derived from study of Farmer and Scheper-Hughes as a provisional and working

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<sup>115</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, “Irigaray and the Divine,” in C. W. Maggie Kim, Susan St. Ville and Susan Simonaitis, editors, Transfigurations: Theology and the French Feminists (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 210.



definition of “the religious,” we may or may not experience a homology between the study of religion among others, and our own experiences of the religious as shaped by our own cultural settings. The homology takes different forms, depending on different anthropologists’ backgrounds and interests, and in light of the various ways they enter the conjuncture of constructing cultural worlds and attending to extreme upheaval. Farmer and Scheper-Hughes entered that conjuncture with not only ethnographic discipline, but also with interpretive styles that foregrounded their informants’ religious life and their own religious-like sensibilities. In the process, the four traits emergent from their interpretive adventure might reorient us in our studies of religion, or, at least, might prompt us toward our own different studies, in some new ways.