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## **All Change! An examination of the role of transition and change in enriching teaching and learning in undergraduate and A Level Anthropology**

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### **Abstract**

Change and transition are both foci of anthropological investigation. Recent decades within the anthropology of religion, for example, have seen a shift of focus from seeing religious conversion as an event to its viewing as a process, something continual and of the nature of an extended and ongoing enactment. Such approaches challenge theoretical perspectives previously dominant, yet still popular, in the discipline. For example, Turner's (1969) examination of *The Ritual Process* accentuates that there is an element of progression to a ritual act, yet calls upon a model that demonstrates distinct stages with marked boundaries indicating transition from one of these stages onto another. This intimates at the existence of distinct categories between neophytes pre- and post-conversion. Yet, when religious conversion comes to be seen as an ongoing process, or a negotiation between previous and adopted identities, the distinctiveness of this transition and of the boundaries between these categories becomes blurred, and one might even argue that liminality itself has been extended. This poses a challenge to the traditional understandings previously dominant in the discipline and leaves the student scholar swamped in a quick sand of post-modernity.

Yet, the teaching of anthropology itself is also embedded in relationships of change. Here, I call upon the context of teaching the new A Level in Anthropology at a sixth form college in a semi-rural community to elucidate the dramatic changes required of a student in moving on from the GCSE qualification to success in Anthropology at this more advanced level, and also consider the preparation that the A Level course provides for progression onto studying the discipline in Higher Education. This investigation reveals that the ritualised regurgitation of information required at GCSE level aids students with the retention of the ethnographic

narratives of anthropology, however leaves them ill prepared for the analytical skills demanded by the discipline. Yet despite the challenging demands that this programme of study makes of its students, the new A Level Anthropology qualification develops key critical thinking skills that benefit students across their A Level subjects in addition to bringing them a new lens, or – in a post-modern sense – many new lenses, through which to see the world.

Through an examination of the implications of changes in the emphasis of scholars' examination of religious conversion and a study of the transitions that students experience in progressing through their education in anthropology, this paper demonstrates how issues of change enhance discussion and debate in the discipline and consequently enrich teaching and learning.

### **An environment of change**

The sixth form college can be seen to be a liminal setting. The highly structured, often uniformed environment of the school, where the teachers are frequently still called “Sir” or “Miss”, contrasts steeply with the non-uniformed, first-name milieu of the college. That this is a place “betwixt-and-between” can be testified to by the lecturers who are busy in the process of converting GCSE holders into potential undergraduates. Whether the dynamics of performance management systems, where students are allocated a target grade based on their GCSE achievements, can truly constitute their being a “*tabula rasa*” remains a fair question for us to pose, yet the two Anthropology students targeted a D grade who attained an A grade in their AS Level qualifications this summer show that this is a place of ambiguity, ‘a half-way house in which they have a taste of freedom by choosing the subjects they want to do’ (VandeSteege 2012: 31), where the previous identity is wiped clear and a new one is forged, and where the teaching staff (even if male) might still be called “Mum”.

No doubt there are many ways in which we can point to colleges being highly structured social settings, however the analogy of the tripartite model of Arnold van Gennep's (1960), as adopted and enhanced by Victor Turner (1969), serves to show how the lecturer in a sixth form college is rooted in a period of change, and that their teaching has to respond to the demands of seeing students through this transition. In looking at this period of change in a similar context, Bonnie VandeSteege reveals the need for students to “unlearn” parts of their GCSE experience and to learn afresh the knowledge and skills required for A Level work,

and is not the first to observe that they 'come to A-levels carrying many weaknesses from their studies at GCSE' (2012: 32). Twenty years ago, students bemoaned the ill preparation with which the then-new GCSE qualification in Music provided them for taking up the subject at A Level (Spencer 1993), and in a comprehensive study of users' perceptions of the GCSE qualification, Bishop *et al.* (1999) voiced the concern of teachers and lecturers as to its ability to prepare students for study at A Level, although they conceded, as does Walford (2004), that there is some correlation between success at GCSE and success at A Level. Then there is the issue of how well students leave A Levels prepared for their degree; here I consider briefly the role of A Levels generally in preparation for university and the Anthropology A Level in particular in preparation for the undergraduate study of anthropology.

## **Background**

This paper is written by a lecturer in Anthropology at a sixth form college in a semi-rural community in the south-west of England and therefore someone engaged in assisting students through the transition from GCSE to A Level and delivering the new Anthropology A Level specification. I benefit from a postgraduate education in anthropology and education, and the experience of conducting fieldwork. The college has run the A Level course from its launch in September 2010 and has grown to have approximately 50-70 students studying the subject in any one year across AS and A Levels, approximately 20 of whom will be doing Anthropology at the higher level. There is an approximate ratio of two females to every one male studying the subject. I shall draw on this experience to argue that issues of change enhance discussion and debate in the discipline and resultantly enrich teaching and learning. Change, in these terms, will be examined from the point of view of the development of the academic skills and *pathos* required for success at A Level, which students then take with them on to university, and in terms of changes of emphasis in the discipline, which appear to problematize earlier theoretical perspectives, for which I will consider the example of religious conversion.

This research is based upon observations at college both within and outwith the classroom, informal conversations with students, and students' responses to being asked to reflect on the changes they have undergone at college generally and as a result of studying Anthropology

specifically, based on a semi-structured format. The ninety-eight students collaborating with this research come from a range of ability levels and stages, sixteen of whom have provided more detailed responses. Some have only just taken their AS Level examinations; some have just completed their A Levels and are now going up to university. Others completed their A Levels a year ago and are about to go to university after taking a gap year, and a few have just completed their first year of undergraduate study. The attainment of these students varies from an A\* grade at A Level to a U at AS. What all these individuals share is that they have been students of the new A Level in Anthropology, and in this sense - if not others - it may be said that their views and experiences are not essentially representative of A Level students more broadly, however they constitute a representative cross-section of their subject group from this semi-rural environment. The demographic would most likely be different in a more urban area.

### **Perceptions of the change in level of work from GCSE to A Level**

Stables and Stables (1995) thought that, particularly in relation to Modern Foreign Languages, the transition from GCSE to A Level involved a larger jump than did the transition from the former O Level to A Level. VandeSteege (2012) observed her college students perform more poorly in college diagnostic assessments than their GCSE results would indicate, suggesting that they had been taught to the test in schools and were not carrying essential skills forward. Such views and findings provide evidence that supports Bishop *et al.*'s (1999) data, revealing that of all stake holders, teachers and lecturers are those with the least confidence in the GCSE qualification's ability to prepare students for A Level. Nevertheless teachers and lecturers accepted, somewhat contradictorily as Bishop *et al.* acknowledge, that A\*-B grades at GCSE provide a good indicator for success in A Levels (1999: 45), indeed with teaching staff in schools often preferring pupils to have at least a B grade for progression onto their subject at A Level (1999: 43). They attributed this contradiction to a nostalgia for the O Level, the fact that there is perhaps more of a transition in respect of some GCSE subjects compared to others, and that stringent performance requirements are possibly less relevant to vocational qualifications. They are perhaps omitting to consider that success at both GCSE and A Level is an indicator of a student's ability to adapt well to the academic demands made of them, even if those demands are very

different at each respective level and even if the one does not necessarily prepare them well for the other.

Approximately two thirds of the students I consulted held that the transition from GCSE to A Level had been difficult. As one student put it,

‘I think there is a big jump up in the difficulty level and level of workload between GCSEs and A Levels. I don't think school or GCSEs prepared me well for this.’

All of the remainder thought that it was neither difficult nor easy, apart from one student who found the change straightforward. When asked how well GCSEs had prepared them for A Level study, just over half thought that they had had a fair amount of preparation, one student felt that it had prepared them well, and the remainder thought that it had given them just a little preparation for what was to come. When asked to elaborate, the most common theme raised was that GCSEs prepared them generally in a number of key skills they still use at A Level, the most frequent of those mentioned being time management, general personal organisation, learning the importance of achieving good grades, revision techniques, knowing that there are certain techniques for answering certain types of examination questions, developing writing skills, and essay writing. These common skills were shared by most, but the students revealed the extent to which their personal experience of education extended to them or denied them opportunity: One student voiced that they had learned the skill of reading lengthy texts during their GCSEs, as their teacher encouraged them to read whole books, whereas most others were used to considering excerpts. Another student had been taught how to plan essays, whereas most said they were just told how an essay should look. A couple of students focused on the areas more meaningful to them, considering the affective impact of GCSEs, commenting that they were about ‘learning how to cope with and take exams’ or ‘motivating myself’, and another considered their instrumentalist role in leading to their ‘being able to communicate well with lecturers and peers’. One summed up,

‘The wide range of subjects at GCSE helped me to decide what I wanted to study further at A Level and helped me to get into good study habits.’

Very few students mentioned coursework or learning how to research as benefits of GCSE study. All realised the importance of fact memorisation for revision, and this seemed particularly important for the GCSE. Students found the “stories” of ethnographies easier to remember as a result.

When asked how their GCSEs had prepared them for studying the Anthropology A Level in particular, all but a handful felt that GCSEs prepared them less well for this specific qualification than they did for their A Levels in general. This was to the extent that a quarter of the participants in the study thought that GCSEs had not prepared them well for this subject at all. The rest thought that it had prepared them a little, but often within specific subject areas only. One student stated, ‘Some lessons (particularly R.E.) allowed us to view a culture from a cultural relativism point of view’, with another adding,

‘With humanity subjects like R.E., you learn the appropriate way to deal with cultures and teachings that perhaps are hard to understand or accept and I feel they began to increase my awareness of differing ideas around the world. I think of course English and History helped, in that I learnt [a] core essay technique which I could apply to Anthropology questions too.’

Yet, even the students who could see connections with previous subjects still felt that their GCSEs had generally prepared them less well for Anthropology than for their other A Level subjects. This is probably owing to the types of skills explicitly required in anthropology compared to those taught at GCSE.

One of the areas in which students felt most underprepared in terms of readiness for their A Levels was working independently. When asked to clarify what they meant by this, students explained that this was not only having to carry out independent reading and research in their own time, but also thinking independently too. A number of students expressed this in terms of ‘thinking analytically’. They realised that they had gone beyond regurgitating information for their GCSEs to making connections for themselves in their A Levels. This is especially relevant to the study of anthropology. As one student put it,

‘There is a lot more to remember... in the History A Level for example you learn mainly facts, but in Anthropology you learn facts along with theories, theorists, tribe names and place names, then you put them to all together to get your answers.’

The students have to take ownership of the knowledge for themselves and process it intellectually to make connections with theories and other cultural settings. Many taking Anthropology commented on the breadth and depth of both the learning and the reading that the subject requires, some saying that GCSE was no preparation for reading sections of academic articles. This is a problem acknowledged by VandeSteege (2012). Frequent

comparisons were made between studying anthropology and learning a foreign language in that so much new vocabulary is taken on when pursuing the course. Students also observed the need to write 'good' or 'sophisticated' essays, something of a different type to that which they were doing at GCSE. The fact that the Anthropology A Level involves all of these skills, for which students felt they were not well prepared after GCSE, indicates why they would see the GCSE as a worse preparation for Anthropology in particular. Nevertheless, these skills are required in a number of A Levels, so perhaps what is occurring in Anthropology is the heightening of an awareness of the skills they are exercising and need. This reflexive approach is promoted within the discipline and, in a sense, the students were encouraged to carry out an anthropology of their own education through the transparency of discussions about their pursuit of the course within lessons.

There is a general perception amongst the students that Anthropology is a hard A Level. This is borne witness to in the examination board's statistics, which reveal that the percentage of A\* or A grades awarded falls beneath averages across all subjects, for example in 2013 the percentage of A\*-A grades at A Level for all subjects at all centres for AQA was 23% whereas that for Anthropology was almost half this at 12%. There is thus no questioning the academic integrity of the qualification or any chance of it being seen as a soft option. To some extent, this statistic is probably the result of teachers grappling with a new discipline, however students find the wording of examination questions harder than they do in their other subjects, even when they have a strong command of anthropological vocabulary. Over half the students said that they found Anthropology quite hard compared to their other A Level subjects. Just under half found it about the same level of difficulty, and one student with a particular longstanding fascination with culture said that she found it easy. We have to be careful that we are not crafting an elitist discipline, as in a world where pass rates and top grades determine the longevity of courses in teaching and learning institutions, the future of the qualification could otherwise come under threat, however misplaced such a judgment would be.

Interestingly, though, discussions about the difficulty of the subject, on the back on the changes required of students between GCSE and A Level and in pursuit of this new discipline, enrich teaching and learning: Students openly discuss what is difficult about the subject in class, which helps them all to understand better the knowledge and skills they are required to demonstrate. This gives rise to the opportunity for modelling the application of



theory or cross-cultural comparisons, which aids the students to develop these skills for themselves. In this way, we see them beginning to go through the process that Coleman and Simpson (2004) called 'Knowing, Doing, and Being'.

Coleman (2011: 8) discovered, in an analysis of A Level specifications potentially giving rise to complementary anthropological material, that many examiners' reports 'were specifically looking for more cross-cultural comparisons in the case studies discussed by students in their submitted work'. Similarly, Greatorex and Malacova (2006) observed a problem of teaching Chemistry to the test in terms of challenges caused by the transition from GCSE to A Level:

'[Some senior examiners...] thought that some teachers might be teaching candidates generic or model answers to synoptic examination paper questions, and that the candidates were simply repeating these answers, often inappropriately. Candidates can be prepared for the synoptic unit but should not rehearse model answers which can be used to answer a range of questions, because this tends to result in their not demonstrating the analytical skills or synthesis required by the unit. The senior examiners thought that whole centres were in some cases following the same (evidently pre-prepared) answer format, and were less successful than they might have been otherwise.'

The Anthropology A Level develops the skills of synoptic analysis through what Herzfeld (2001) sees as ethnography's reflexive and comparative nature. In this sense, they are developing skills that will benefit them across their A Level subjects; as one student commented, 'I found Anthropology helped improve my research abilities where I would look at multiple sources before putting pen to paper.' Another student said,

'Personally, I think anthropology is an appropriate, relevant and useful course to have the opportunity of studying at A Level. Its broad base complements other studies too, such as economics, history, political science, biology etc.'

Anecdotal evidence from the students confirms that those bringing anthropological knowledge into other subjects, including the General Studies examinations, have seen this lead to successful outcomes in their examination results. A handful of students have attributed A grades in AS Level General Studies to their bringing of anthropology into their responses. This breadth of skills and cultural awareness gives the students greater opportunity for discussion and debate, making their engagement with subjects in general

more interesting and rewarding for them. Thus the changes expected of the students in the transition from GCSE to A Level are something for us to embrace, enriching teaching and learning, and leaving them better prepared for study in their other A Level subjects as well as at the next level.

### **Preparation for moving on to degree level**

One of the hardest concepts for students to absorb in pursuing A Level Anthropology is cultural relativity. It appears to go against most of their prior educational experience that is often opinion-centred, except in the case of Religious Education, as some students have pointed out. In this sense, there is a *pathos* the students embrace before the subject “clicks” and when they become true potential anthropologists. A number of them described the change in them anthropology has brought. One student explained,

‘After studying Anthropology, I see even the most trivial things differently. For example, I sat on holiday wondering why people travel to holiday resorts just to lie in the sun and congregate around water. Is there something innate to humans that makes water and sunshine special? I don't think I'd ever really thought deeply about the way people behave until I studied Anthropology.’

Another added,

‘I think before studying it, I was always quick to point out differences between other cultures and ours, but in reality there are an equal amount of similarities. This has made me feel a lot more united with our world I guess. The whole idea about race being a social construct has also impacted my thinking and I am quite surprised I wasn't taught it before! It seems such an appropriate thing to include in the various PSHE [Personal, Social and Health Education] lessons we had on racism!’

One student voiced the impact cultural relativism has had on his practice:

‘Cultural relativity, and an understanding of the reasons behind different social practices, has changed my perception of others to a more reasoned and inquisitive approach.’

Another suggested that they now 'look for reasons other than the obvious to explain someone's behaviour', with a fellow student having taken this to a positivist extreme, now believing that 'there's an explanation for everything in society'. But the understanding of cultural relativism has not left students opinion-free: One student stated that Anthropology 'has allowed me to form educated opinions about important issues such as evolution, globalisation and some politics'. Other students saw the pragmatic benefits of the subject too, one announcing, 'I have learnt that the environment has a massive impact on certain cultures and how I could help the environment and people', driving her to go on to complete a gap year before taking up the subject at Manchester, and another acknowledging it 'has allowed me to understand the impacts of globalisation and how this affects other cultures'. In fact, all students believed that studying Anthropology had changed them to some extent, with most believing that the subject has had a big impact on their understanding of the world. In this sense, they would be moving onto university influenced by anthropological ways of thinking and ready to embrace these. These strengths of studying the subject demonstrate the role it, and its students, can play in the promotion of values of equality and diversity, and sustainability, within educational institutions also.

Some of the students have already gone on to study anthropology at UCL, SOAS, Durham and Sussex and there are students due to take up places to read the subject at Manchester, Birmingham and Oxford Brookes this year. Sometimes they are reading Anthropology as a Single Honours course, other times it is taken jointly with other subjects or as part of a Human Sciences programme. What is clear is that a number of students gain an enthusiasm for the subject from studying it at A Level and move on to become the undergraduates that the Education Committee of the RAI and anthropology department heads hoped the A Level would bring (Bennett 2011: 112-3). Of the first cohort of the college's students studying the subject to A Level, half of the class went on to take courses in or including anthropology at university.

Those with the benefit of the hindsight of having completed their first undergraduate year were asked about the transition between A Level and degree-level study. All students agreed that their Anthropology A Level had prepared them better for degree-level study than had their A Levels in general. They felt they were well prepared in terms of 'writing coherent arguments and essays in general', 'looking at different perspectives', 'understanding opposing arguments, theories, etc.', 'how to reference correctly', 'being used to carrying out

additional research', 'critical thinking', and 'analytical approaches'. Clearly the reflexive and comparative nature of anthropology (Herzfeld 2001) had left them comfortable with some of the tasks they were to face at university. Where they felt less well prepared was for the increase of workload again at degree level, mentioning in particular the 'essay sizes', 'the importance of wider reading' and the need for 'independent research skills such as how to find relevant articles, journals and books and also how to use them most effectively.' These are perhaps important pointers for the departments receiving students having completed the Anthropology A Level qualification. Students suggested that their A Level courses could be enhanced by helping students prepare for Higher Education by providing more information on how to locate academic journals and articles both in the library and online, however access to such resources is highly limited in the sixth form college setting. They also felt they would benefit from more help in interpreting academic articles and being shown what to look for; this is perhaps something we can all do.

The students were clear about what they were carrying forward to their university study. One explained, 'Anthropology has opened my eyes and mind to certain things that I would have looked at differently if I had not studied the subject' and another confirming that the course had 'made it easier to relate to people in life and see things from different points of view'. Not only would this enrich their learning in university in general, through now having the "*habitus*" of seeing things from more than one perspective, but also they are moving on with a curiosity to learn about issues affecting other people around the world and even at home, possessing a new lens, or – in a post-modern sense – many new lenses, through which to see the world. The change they go through, then, as part of the Anthropology A Level, encourages them to challenge and question, and to enter into discussion and debate, which enriches their teaching and learning. Yet the changes with which students are confronted are not only ones of transition, but also in the trends of scholarly opinion within the development of the subject, as the instance of religious conversion shows.

### **The "problem" of changing perspectives in the discipline**

As a cornerstone of the ritual element of their A Level studies, students meet with the classic analyses of the format of rites of passage as communicated by Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1969). That separation occurs, a liminal phase ensues and reaggregation takes

place become the hallmarks of a rudimentary analysis of rites of passage, such as religious conversion. One might turn to think of the initial stating of the *shahada* by a convert, or more emically correct *revert*, to Islam, where the individual removes his or her self from an outer-worldly setting and recites the confession of faith in front of witnesses, which act transforms him or her from non-Muslim to Muslim, relaunching him or her into the world free of any past transgressions and thus liberated from the former self, yet subject to new rights, duties and obligations as part of the new identity carried forward. There appears, on face value, to be an old identity, a period of transformation, and a new identity, with marked separation and difference between each. The forgiveness of the person's sins echoes the notion of the blank slate, or *tabula rasa*, and the oft-effected adoption of an Arabic name (certainly amongst the converts to Islam I studied in Mexico (Lindley-Highfield 2008)) marks the symbolic death of the former self and rebirth as a Muslim. The implication of the rite of passage is that a change has been effected that has totally transformed the individual and constitutes a clear break with the past, and this is how students go forward in the subject in understanding how rites of passage work, however scholars' views on religious conversion have gone in a slightly different direction.

Turner (1969) himself saw ritual as a process, a process of three stages within which a liminal phase is essential to enable social transformations to take place. There is the need for a state in which external constraints are broken down, markers of status are removed and equality exists in order for society to be able to carry on in its structured form. Yet despite Turner's evidence for societies embodying *communitas* and thus occupying a state of liminality, his work accepts the existence of a structured society in which social transformations are possible, and indeed necessary. More recent scholarly examinations of religious conversion have come to see it as a process too rather than as an act, but in a way that appears on face value to challenge rather than support a Turnerian analysis of ritual events. This leaves students who go on to learn these new perspectives finding their previous conceptions challenged.

Diane Austin-Broos (2003: 9), for instance, has said that 'conversion is continuing' being 'neither syncretism nor absolute breach' (2003: 1). Anderson (2003: 130) witnessed converts 'differentiate or syncretise' between their former and new traditions, influenced by other factors around them, and Coleman (2003: 20) regards conversion as a 'quality of action', meaning that the certain quality needs to carry on for conversion to take place. For Brown

(2003), conversion can never be seen to be complete for the converts to Christian Spiritualism he studied in the United States. These views reflect the post-modern perspective that human experience does not fit into discrete and distinct categories without overlaps and idiosyncrasies, and that religious conversion is an ongoing process, perhaps even an ideal, that in reality may never be wholly achieved. Such perspectives represent a much less structured view of society than students encounter when considering the role and nature of rites of passage. Ethnographic evidence is given to support these positions.

Brown (2003: 136), for example, views the converts to Christian Spiritualism as being in a state of 'ephemeral' change, with their belief in mediumship and the spirit realm growing and depleting without any strong position of faith developing. For Brown then, there is no completed conversion, as one day the person may be sceptical and another day they may be convinced, but without any consistency. On the one hand, a student looking at this example might question the extent to which there is any rite of passage marking entrance to this tradition and, if not, use this to explain why there is no fixed conversion. On the other hand, the student might view the first time the would-be convert believes mediumship has taken place to be the conversion event. In support of this latter position, Brown appears to omit to note that in some sense or other a conversion has taken place, a conversion of the mindset of the individual to the view that mediumship *can* provide proof of the spirit realm, even if this evidence is not apparent on every occasion, and we might then view this mission to see the proof of an afterlife as a sign that the convert has accepted a key doctrine of spiritualism and thus has at least intellectually internalised part of their faith. Brown's fieldnotes, however, might disprove or at least question this interpretation.

There is a problem to seeing conversion simply as a radical transformation of belief as per Hierich (1977). This 'intellectualist' position ignores the significance of practice in addition to belief (Hefner 1993). We might see the physical attendance of the converts to Christian Spiritualism at mediumship sessions as further evidence of their conversion, but this waxes and wanes as does their belief. Tooker's (1992) study of Akha Zan reminds us that we need to explore the context to discover if belief or behaviour is the dominant method of understanding a change in identity, such as we see effected by religious conversion.

The idea of continuous conversion, or of the persistence of a particular quality of action, suggests that the identity of the convert is not radically changed by any ritual event but rather only comes into being by their continued exercise of this newly adopted identity. An

implication of this perspective is that any rite of passage by which this identity is adopted is not in and of itself sufficient to effect the transformation from one identity to another. A continued practice is required also. If, however, this practice does not continue, seemingly then a conversion has not taken place. This appears to question the efficacy of the rite of passage, something that at A Level the students were taught to be the case. Here lies the challenge to a student scholar's understanding of such changing perspectives in the discipline: Has a rite of passage occurred or not? Has there been a transformation? Any sense of the necessity of continuity to conversion certainly means that the transformation is incomplete, but the earlier theoretical literature on rites of passage implies that the transformation has moved the neophyte from one clear category to another, even if the maintenance of that identity is then dependent on certain future beliefs and behaviours. As the students progress in their studies and move onto degree level work, they discover further literature on the subject and appear to be confronted by a contradiction.

I recall from my fieldwork in Mexico a convert to Islam heading out one evening and drinking alcohol. The next day, a fellow Muslim asked me if I had heard what had happened the night before, to which I pleaded ignorance. He explained that the Muslim who had been out drinking that night had got home and spent the night awake in tears, berating himself for behaving contrary to the teachings of his religion and praying for forgiveness. This example is a fitting one to test the distinction between continuous conversion, syncretism and the theoretical idea that a rite of passage has effected a transformation of an individual's identity, since these are three distinct perspectives that students could find themselves considering.

On the one hand, if religious conversion requires a certain quality of action to persist, a student might view someone who has disobeyed the teachings of their religion as having lapsed in that quality of action and thus that their conversion has lapsed also. If not, they are embroiled in a debate over semantics as to what is actually meant by a quality of action and exactly which actions require maintaining. Syncretism, on the other hand, implies a fusion between different perspectives, and it is true that in either of this convert's pre-conversion states of alternatively describing himself as a Roman Catholic or an atheist he was free to drink alcohol, so a student might argue that drinking alcohol after his religious conversion is a fusion of these past practices with his new religious identity. Yet, there is no prescriptive requirement for him to drink alcohol, other than perhaps during Mass, in his previous worldviews, thus to call it syncretism appears to stretch the application of the term. No

doctrines have been fused in his practice. Then, if he has been subject to a transformation of his identity by going through the rite of passage of becoming a Muslim, it seems appropriate that he evaluates his behaviour from this perspective, so the student could find support for this position also.

Priest (2003) accounts for conversion in a way that makes sense of this predicament. A successful conversion is one that joins 'personal experience and religious symbols in a way that provides personal coherence and models the route to a new self', adding that 'Even when the new self remains unattained, the new symbols continue to exert influence and authority not easily ignored' (Priest 2003: 107). In other words, it is perfectly possible to have an identity and also to act in contravention of that identity, while still being influenced by and susceptible to the expectations of the identity itself. Our convert to Islam has not attained the perfect form of his new self, so in this sense it remains unattained, however he is subject to the influence and authority of this new self, and these are not easily ignored. This seems a plausible account of what might constitute a successful conversion and for a conversion to be complete. Clearly this is only appropriate in contexts such as this, that of the Islamic faith, where there is a considerable emphasis on internal mental states, such as intentions. Whether it is externally observable behaviour or internal mental states, or both, that should be the gauge is something requiring ethnographic exploration in other contexts. So through applying ideas such as these, students learn that what at first appears universal may only apply in specific contexts under certain conditions, and once again change is of the essence in respect of how what they have learned applies to different ethnographic accounts.

Travisano (1970) is of the view that conversion is successful when the transformation a neophyte goes through is 'complete'. Whatever does not fall into this category, for him, is alternation, so syncretism falls within this latter definition. These are, thus, qualitative categories, determining the extent to which conversion has been realised, which gives the student a form of measure as to how successful a rite of passage might have been. These categories, however, appear somewhat lacking, in that there is a wide margin of difference between simply failing to internalise a religion and syncretism. I would suggest that it is more useful to break religious conversion down into four possible ideal types: "conversion" as the successful model, "lapsed conversion" as conversion that fails to hold, "alternation" for conversion that oscillates between the old practices and the new, and "syncretism" for two or more religious practices that have been integrated into what would appear to be a



homogenised belief system, in the sense that the different “religions” are integrated in practice. By these measures, the student could determine that the convert to Islam is neither exhibiting syncretism, as there is no fusion of his beliefs into a singular system, nor does he appear to have a lapsed conversion, as he is exhibiting remorse, indicating his viewing of his actions *in the religion’s terms*. They could argue that we might be witnessing alternation, but only if they can make a convincing case that his drinking habits are part of his former worldview, but if not, this appears to be an instance of successful conversion, even though his behaviour does not match the expectations of his faith, as he is seeing his behaviour in the religion’s terms, and he goes on to pray for the forgiveness of his actions within the framework provided by his new faith.

This example suggests that it is possible to see conversion as a completed event, even if conversion creates rights, obligations, duties and responsibilities that may not be lived up to and even if there is a need for some sense of a continuity to this identity for it to be maintained. So a rite of passage can be efficacious, supporting the theory of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner that students met during their A Levels. Yet, if the convert had abandoned both the behaviours and the beliefs of the newly adopted religion, the conversion would have lapsed and we could then question whether it occurred at all, supporting the views of scholars such as Austin-Broos, Anderson, Brown and Coleman, which the students might encounter in wider reading at university. However, surely if the convert has not secured their identity after a rite of passage and it is syncretistic or oscillatory, they remain in an ambiguous state, the hallmark of liminality; and if liminality ensues, surely there has been no transformation? Such are the questions students find themselves confronted with, as they move on to undergraduate study and begin to learn the changes of emphasis of scholars in the discipline.

It appears fitting that it is the work of Turner that creates for us this problem, since – as Bennetta Jules-Rosette (1994) has pointed out – he foretold the arrival of postmodern culture, and, as St. John (2008: 12) describes him, he ‘occupied the threshold between modern and postmodern thought’. The man that married structure to change perhaps opened the door to an inevitable dependency of structure on agency. Such changes as these in the emphasis of scholars on areas of anthropology on first glance appear to cause students problems with finding a consistent pathway through anthropological thought, however this type of change is another that enriches teaching and learning in the discipline. Students can find their own

voice amongst the differing interpretations and see which matches the empirical evidence best for them, or even find a way of showing the mutual compatibility of seemingly differing perspectives. Thus what first appears to be a problem is actually something that adds interest to the subject for the student and encourages them to explore the topic further.

## **Conclusion**

There is an inevitability to students of anthropology facing change. For those seizing that early opportunity to explore the subject during A Levels, they are learning new skills in a period of significant transformation, as they move from GCSE to A Level, further rehearsing some learned skills whilst for the first time developing others. Then there are those going onto university, who might feel better prepared than others after their experience of Anthropology, who however still have to meet the greater expectations in terms of word counts, wider reading, and accessing a diverse range of resources. Yet, as they move through the subject, they inevitably encounter change in terms of shifts in the emphasis of scholars in various areas of the discipline, so that things they once took for granted are challenged and new information or ways of seeing things come to light.

All of these changes, whilst being challenges, give rise to opportunities to enrich teaching and learning in the discipline. The reflexivity of anthropology encourages students to address the steps they need to take to meet the transition from GCSE to A Level, while – together with the subject's comparative nature – this helps students to achieve in their other subjects also. Then, as they experience challenging new views and perspectives as they move on in their studies, they encounter greater opportunities for discussion and debate, where they can test their own preconceptions and the positions before them to find, within the discipline, their own voice.

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