Engelke, Matthew, and **Matt Tomlinson** (eds.): The Limits of Meaning. Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity. New York: Berghahn Books, 2006. 239 pp. ISBN 978-1-84545-170-7. Price: $ 75.00

This book is a collection of papers all of which, with the exception of two, were originally presented in a session entitled "Christian Ritual and the Limits of Meaning" at the 2002 meeting of the American Anthropological Association in New Orleans. All such edited volumes of papers will inevitably have their strengths and weaknesses and this, no doubt, is also the case here. The authors, six male and three female, are all Western academics working in Western universities, all except two in the USA, with the exceptions working in the UK and Australia.

It is a given in anthropology and the study of religions today, as the editors make clear in their opening chapter "Meaning, Anthropology, Christianity," that "Christianity is not a stable, singular object" (19) and indeed one speaks increasingly of Christianities in the plural given the great variety of expression of the Christian faith one finds all over the world. This book as the title states is a study of the limits of meaning based on case studies in the anthropology of Christianity. These case studies are drawn from across the world (Sweden, Zimbabwe, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa, Bolivia, and the USA). They also come from across a representative part of the Christian denominational spectrum (Pentecostalism, Methodism, African Initiated Christianity, Branch Dravidians, and Catholicism). The book examines questions arising in relation to charisma, ritual, nationalism and millenarianism, power and authority, homiletics, conversion, inculturation, and semiotics.

The editors Matt Timlinson and Matthew Engelke justify their concentration on Christianity by noting "the fact that Christians often express a concern with meaning" but also the fact that "debates within the anthropology of religion have raised questions about the extent to which a focus on meaning is itself an approach informed by the history of Christian thought" (1). The starting point for this theoretical chapter is the work of Clifford Geertz and the critique of this by other anthropologists. The authors note that Talcott Parsons and Geertz "have been two of the most important interpreters of Max Weber's interest in the problem of meaning." The problem of meaning is defined by Geertz as the compulsion to create coherent explanations of "bafflement, pain and moral paradox." "It is the process of interpretation writ large: How can humans tolerate chaos, accept the unexplainable, and endure physical and moral torment, without seeking a reason?" For Geertz anthropology is "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (2). This, the authors note, has become a routine position with cultural anthropology over the past several decades.

Talal Asad contests this dominant position, stating that one of Geertz's problems is that like many other anthropologists he is obsessed with the question of meaning, while having little understanding of the place of power and history. He asserts that "Geertz's definition of religion as humanity's attempt to generate ultimate symbolic meanings is, … 'a view that has a specific Christian history' " (3). Meaning has its limits and these can be traced in moments of failure and as Asad, Bloch, and Foucault suggest they can also be found "through attention to discipline, authority, and power" (5).

The authors examine the different "meanings of meaning": meaning as structure in the sense of Lévi-Strauss, meaning as intention, symbolic meaning, and meaning as being, before turning to look at the different ways Christian subjects articulate meaning in the following chapters. They also look at ritual and the limits of meaning noting that "an emphasis on meaning entails the potential of its absence, negation, or irrelevance. In the meaning-saturated world of Christianity, where understanding God's message becomes paramount, meanings *as a result* become slippery in performance" (23). "Meaning" is often an inadequate tool so other tools must be sought. All the chapters in the book look at the question of meanings' limits.

In the concluding chapter of the book, Joel Robbins notes anthropologists' historical aversion to Christianity as a subject of investigation. "[T]hey have tended to find Christian cultural elements rather meaningless – bits of syncretic foam floating on oceans of meaningful traditional culture … or tired routines followed by alienated masses whose real culture, or real hope of finding a meaningful culture, must lie elsewhere" (220f.). Robbins suggests that one of the reasons for the aversion may be that anthropologists recoil from the Christian obsession with meaning – "its compulsiveness, its unwillingness to leave anything unaccounted for, its unrelenting wordiness" (221) before concluding somewhat archly that, in this regard, it may well be much like anthropology itself. This, the claim, "is one of the first [works] … built around the assertion that anthropological studies of Christianity can contribute to questions of general theoretical import, such as the place of meaning and meaninglessness in human cultures" (220). As such it may well be read with some interest by anthropologists striving to overcome their aversion. Patrick Claffey

Finnström, Sverker: Living with Bad Surroundings. War, History, and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. 288 pp. ISBN 978-0-8223-4191-8. Price: $ 22.95

The author states, "this book explores the various ways Acholi people in northern Uganda struggle to establish control and balance in their daily lives in the midst of civil war, and how they construct meaning and understand the war as they live their humanity – always, however, in intersection with the wider global community. The Acholi homeland has been ravaged by war since 1986" (4). The author's research was carried out intermittently in northern Uganda between 1997 and 2003. It formed the basis for his doctoral dissertation.

Finnström describes the complexity of living in a war zone where there is neither social order nor safety and where even the idea of peace is problematic since