

**EVANS-PRITCHARD, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND  
CATHOLICISM AT OXFORD:  
GODFREY LIENHARDT'S VIEW**

AHMED AL-SHAHI

As the literary executor of Godfrey Lienhardt's estate, I have had the task of working through his papers to see what should be kept and what might be published. Recently, I was intrigued to find two documents that he had kept. The first was a letter dated 8 December 1988 from a Mr Peter Vidot, a graduate student and chaplain at the Australian National University (ANU) who wished to undertake research for a MA thesis on Catholicism and Oxford anthropologists. The second was Lienhardt's reply dated 4 January 1989, in the form of a top copy with amendments in pencil. This brief correspondence is interesting because it deals with E. E. Evans-Pritchard's supposed influence on the religious beliefs of Oxford anthropologists and their conversion to Roman Catholicism. Although Lienhardt only kept copies of a few of his letters, it is clear that this one was intended to be retained for potential future use. As he writes to Vidot (see below), 'I will. . .make a few comments and keep a copy, in case someone else is led to investigate what cannot turn out to be a very rewarding topic.' Clearly, then, the text of Lienhardt's

I am grateful to Fr Vidot for permitting me to quote from his letter to Godfrey Lienhardt and his later letter to me. I am also grateful to Professor James Fox, of the School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University, for tracking down Mr Vidot's address for me. I would also like to express my gratitude to Jeremy Coote for his invaluable help to me in drawing up this paper.

letter can be taken to be a definitive statement of his own views on the subject and his attempt, as he saw it, to set the record straight.

Evans-Pritchard arrived in Oxford in 1946, when he was appointed as Radcliffe-Brown's successor to the Chair of Social Anthropology. Lienhardt, who had already been taught anthropology at Cambridge by Evans-Pritchard, arrived in Oxford as a postgraduate student two years later in 1948, and, apart from periods of fieldwork and brief appointments in Baghdad and Accra, spent the whole of his academic career there.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, as is well known, he was very close to Evans-Pritchard as a friend and a colleague. If anyone was in a position to give an informed opinion on the matter, it was Lienhardt. Given the significance of his letter to the history of anthropology in Oxford at the time, it is reproduced in full here.

In searching for a suitable topic for his research, Vidot had consulted Anthony Forge (at that time, Foundation Professor of Anthropology at ANU), who had suggested 'Catholicism and the Oxford anthropologists, especially Evans-Pritchard', as a suitable topic. A connection between Catholicism, Oxford anthropology, and Evans-Pritchard had been claimed to exist fifteen years before by Adam Kuper in his *Anthropology and Anthropologists* (1973). In his discussion of Evans-Pritchard and 'Oxford anthropology', Kuper stressed Evans-Pritchard's move away from Radcliffe-Brown's 'dogmas' towards a more humanist and historical perspective, claiming that, 'These orientations came to dominate the Oxford school which he built up, and. . .the Oxford anthropologists began to develop an idealist position which marked them off from their colleagues elsewhere in Britain' (ibid.: 157-8). He continued:

These tendencies may have been related to the odd fact that several members of the department were converts to Roman Catholicism, including Evans-Pritchard himself. In many cases students coming to Oxford were converted first to the vogue theoretical position, and subsequently to Roman Catholicism; and the professor [i.e. Evans-Pritchard] acted as godfather at their baptism. (Ibid.)

In his letter to Lienhardt, Vidot remarks how his initial response to Forge's proposed title was 'to think of ways of avoiding a direct discussion of Catholicism in any confessional way'. On reading the works of Oxford anthropologists, Vidot had found that Kuper's linking of 'Catholicism, the adoption of it, and the adoption of Evans-Pritchard's historical methodology' did not correspond with reality. In fact, he had reached a conclusion which 'runs counter to Kuper's suggestion'. He goes on:

From my reading of Evans-Pritchard, Azande, Nuer, Sanusi, and a number of his papers, as well as the brief autobiographical note published in *Blackfriars*

<sup>1</sup> For an account of Lienhardt's career, see Al-Shahi 1997.

in 1973, your own obituary note, and J. A. Barnes's 'Memoirs' (of which I read a draft), it seems clear that we are dealing with a complex evolution of a person's thinking and reflecting. While the immediate focus is on the development of an anthropologist, it is also, necessarily, the map of a person's constant coming to grips with the intangibility of human existence. It seems to me, in the light of the autobiographical note, that Catholicism did not effect a radical and sudden turn in Evans-Pritchard's thinking. What we are faced with is the much more common reality of a person's thinking through various issues, adapting the approach according to the judgement, so to speak, of actual experience.<sup>2</sup>

Vidot then explains that he would be grateful if Lienhardt would clarify certain issues, comment on his observations, and inform him 'how many and who were the Catholics (and who became Catholics)'. Finally, Vidot expresses his own view that Kuper was incorrect regarding 'Evans-Pritchard's role as godfather to those who became Catholics'. Vidot wrote that:

From what I have been able to ascertain so far, quite a number of people who had close dealings with him were obviously not Catholics, e.g. Fortes. It is also clear from other reading that a number of other principal academic figures at Oxford were deeply committed Christians, and that some of these were Catholics. Thus it would seem that a 'ghetto' is not as fitting or accurate a description as Kuper might feel.

In his response to Vidot, Lienhardt dealt directly with these and other questions. The letter is reproduced in full here, with the incorporation of the additions and corrections Lienhardt had made in pencil on a typed top copy:

Dear Fr Vidot,

I am reluctant to become involved in your research into 'Catholicism and the Oxford Anthropologist, especially Evans-Pritchard', not because it is in any way a sensitive subject, but because (as I suspect you are beginning to find out), it is scarcely a subject at all. You will be hard pressed in reading E-P's anthropological work alone to find enough evidence of his Roman Catholicism to make a thesis. Also, since you are discovering that Adam Kuper's slight, impressionistic comments are not borne out by your own research so far, it is surely rather for him to substantiate them than for others (who have quite rightly dismissed them as bits of London University gossip) to controvert them. I will, however, make a few comments and keep a copy, in case

<sup>2</sup> By 'Azande, Nuer, Sanasi', Vidot meant Evans-Pritchard's major works on these peoples. For a list of these and his other publications, see Evans-Pritchard 1974. The specific works Vidot is referring to are Evans-Pritchard 1973 (the 'autobiographical note' in *Blackfriars*), Lienhardt 1974 ('your own obituary note'), and Barnes 1987 ('Memoirs').

someone else is led to investigate what cannot turn out to be a very rewarding topic. Perhaps you should just make a further study of E-P's work, Catholicism or no Catholicism.

There is no link between his Catholicism and his historical methodology (except negatively—he wasn't a Marxist). He was a historian by training before he became an anthropologist, and the tendency to look to history rather than to natural sciences in writing about social relations was the beginning of a more general reaction against the then dominant teachings of Radcliffe-Brown about a 'natural science of society', which are now for the most part regarded as part of the history of anthropology, sometimes in my view with less respect for R-B's work than it deserves.

Evans-Pritchard was brought up in the Anglican church, and his conversion to Catholicism was regarded as a kind of defection from the mainly rationalist, agnostic or 'humanist' principles of his pre-war friends at LSE. For him, it only added to what he already found sympathetic and familiar. I cannot remember quite which people were together on the staff here in the early days, but there were then two Catholics beside himself (Mary Douglas briefly and I), both of whom were Catholics before coming here; and a Hindu and three Jews, Fortes, Gluckman, and Steiner.<sup>3</sup> We did not enquire, of course, into the state of each other's active beliefs, if any. Peristiany, who joined later, was Greek Orthodox by upbringing, and the only other Catholics in the whole of the rest of the time until now (1949–89) were Pocock, who left for Sussex, and my brother, who was appointed as an Arabist.<sup>4</sup> There was no question of Catholic preferences. I have just retired after 40 years here, and in that time there have only been four Catholics except E-P on the staff, and those at different times. It is not for me to say how far either *pratiquant* or *croquant* any of them was, but there was certainly not the slightest proselytism, and indeed of the hundreds of people who have passed through here, scarcely anyone, I should think, regarded the Institute as a centre of 'Catholicism'. It attracted missionaries and clergy of various denominations, but because it is the only entirely postgraduate school in England and they (like you, I imagine) wanted to complement their theology by anthropology. It was, of course, known that the Institute was not doctrinally agnostic and rationalist, but people's religious affiliations or absence of them were not discussed. Adam Kuper had no experience of either Oxford or Catholicism, and even labelled John Beattie as a Catholic when a word on the telephone would have taught him quite otherwise.<sup>5</sup> As far as I know, only two individuals have become Catho-

<sup>3</sup> The Hindu was M. N. Srinivas.

<sup>4</sup> Godfrey Lienhardt's brother, Peter (1928–1986), was a Faculty Lecturer in Middle Eastern Sociology at the Institute of Social Anthropology; see Al-Shahi 1996.

<sup>5</sup> In the sentence immediately following the passage from *Anthropologists and Anthropology* quoted above, Kuper lumps together 'Evans-Pritchard, Pocock, Lienhardt, and Beattie', not as Catholics but as 'dons' who wrote introductions to social anthropology (Kuper 1973:

lics while here, one a student, one a teacher, in forty years. Quite a number of priests have since become laicized, on the other hand, though it must be admitted that four have become bishops, in Ghana, India, and South Africa. As far as I know, E-P was not anyone's 'godfather', his children were not brought up as Catholics, and he had little time for the academic Catholic community in Oxford. Our connection with Blackfriars was with friends there who were interested in anthropology, psychoanalysis etc. Cornelius Ernst, for example, was a close friend of mine long before he even became a Catholic. No, I'm afraid Kuper's 'Catholic ghetto' was a figment of his imagination, and what is meant by 'a vogue theoretical position' I cannot imagine. Perhaps Antony Forge (to whom my very warm greetings) can tell you!

Yours sincerely,  
[Godfrey Lienhardt]

After discovering this letter, I got in touch with Fr Vidot, who kindly allowed me to quote not only from his original letter to Lienhardt, but also from a further letter to me of 10 February 1999, in which he reports on the research he actually carried out for his MA thesis (Vidot 1991):

Dr Lienhardt was fairly direct in suggesting that the topic was not, in the form presented initially, a wholly useful one. I found from my own research that there never was, at least on paper, any discernible evidence to support the view that there was a distinctly Catholic influence on Oxford anthropology. This was mainly done in checking through lists of people who were members of staff with Evans-Pritchard. In E-P's own writing there is no sustainable evidence to support such an argument either. My thesis became more an examination of E-P's dialogue with Lévy-Bruhl, Durkheim, and Malinowski, as well as a number of others. It is clear that in *Nuer Religion* E-P utilizes Christian theological terminology, but the debate itself is wholly sociological and frequently a critique of Malinowski's and Durkheim's positions.

It would perhaps be unduly optimistic to hope that the impression created by Kuper will be totally laid to rest by the publication of Lienhardt's letter. Lienhardt's statement, however, is authoritative and to the point and, in my opinion, totally rebuts Kuper's claims. The position is now clear. Let the matter rest.

---

158). It may be that in writing to Vidot, Lienhardt misremembered this passage and thought Kuper had lumped them together as Catholics.

## REFERENCES

- AL-SHAHI, AHMED 1996. 'Peter Lienhardt, 1928–1986: Biographical Notes and Bibliography', *JASO*, Vol. XXVII, no. 2, pp. 107–12.
- ... 1997. 'Ronald Godfrey Lienhardt, 1921–1993: Biographical Notes and Bibliography', *JASO*, Vol. XXVIII, no. 1, pp. 7–24.
- BARNES, J. A. 1987. 'Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, 1902–1973', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. LXXIII, pp. 446–89.
- EVANS-PRITCHARD, E. E. 1956. *Nuer Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- ... 1973. 'Fragments of an Autobiography', *New Blackfriars* (January), pp. 35–7.
- ... 1974. *A Bibliography of the Writings of E. E. Evans-Pritchard* (compiled by E. E. Evans-Pritchard; amended and corrected by T. O. Beidelman), London: Tavistock.
- KUPER, ADAM 1973. *Anthropology and Anthropologists: The Modern British School, 1922–1972*, London: Allen Lane.
- LIENHARDT, GODFREY 1974. 'E-P, A Personal View: Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard, 1902–1973', *Man* n.s., Vol. IX, no. 2, pp. 299–304.
- VIDOT, PETER ALEXANDER 1991. *Evans-Pritchard and the Anthropology of Religion*, Australian National University: MA thesis.