

*Between pages 176 and 177*

Salim Wilson as a 'Missionary Exhibit', wearing a leopard skin (*Bodleian Library, Oxford, from its copy of Salim Wilson, I Was a Slave, shelfmark 750.121.r.6, opposite page 192, and reproduced by kind permission of Stanley Paul & Co. Ltd., London*)

Salim Wilson at the Wilberforce Centenary, Hull, 1933 (*Bodleian Library, Oxford, from its copy of Salim Wilson, I Was a Slave, shelfmark 750.121.r.6, frontispiece, and reproduced by kind permission of Stanley Paul & Co. Ltd., London*)

WENDY JAMES and DOUGLAS H. JOHNSON

**INTRODUCTORY ESSAY:  
ON 'NATIVE' CHRISTIANITY**

THIS book opens with a case-study of Greece, the home of the Eastern Orthodox Church. For modern Greeks (as for their forebears) their Church is a part of their native and ancient birthright, given in their national cultural identity; and Westerners are barbarians, or at least late-comers to the periphery of Christianity. The Greek case is a salutary starting-point from which to re-evaluate some of our Western ethnocentrism about Christianity. Greece is one of the oldest Christian countries in the world, part of the ancient heartland of the religion. Christianity has been embedded in the social history of Greece over a far longer period than can be claimed for any of the other case-studies in this collection. The attitudes of most modern Greeks, not only towards their Church but towards Christianity, challenge the assumptions many Western European Christians have about the history of the Church and civilization, or the place of faith in Christian identity. It is perhaps upon such discrepancies in social, historical and personal perception, rather than upon formal theological dispute, that great schisms are founded and entrenched. And it is perhaps through the study of the different practices and perceptions of Christians, rather than through the study of their doctrinal differences, that an understanding of Christian diversity can best be achieved. It is here, in the study of the religious life and expression of particular communities at particular times, that anthropology has much to offer Christian studies.

The anthropological study of religion, it has been commonly supposed, deals exclusively with the religion of 'primitive' peoples—the 'native races' of empires only recently past. Even when anthropologists study Christianity, they are often assumed to concern themselves solely with the Christian sects of the imperial periphery. Certainly anthropology from its beginnings made the

study of 'the primitive' peculiarly its own and contributed to the scholarly constructions of 'primitive' mentality, emotion and religion, firmly confining in the process a proportion of the world's peoples to the lowest rung of an evolutionary ladder. Even when the insights of a more modern social anthropology have been applied to the study of European Christianity, they have tended to focus upon earlier and by implication 'simpler' periods in the development of religion in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

The word 'native' has been almost synonymous with 'primitive'. The recent Western image of nativeness, a legacy of nineteenth-century imperial encounters, is defined by contrast to the emissaries of civilization—the explorer, the administrator, the soldier, the missionary. Natives are defined by what they do *not* have: no clothes, no culture, no history, no rationality, no religion, no word for 'thank you'; nothing, in effect, which marks 'civilization'. This caricature is not just part of popular culture. It still surfaces in surprisingly erudite company. But while anthropology has played its role in entrenching this evolutionary stereotype, it has also, more recently, done much to undermine it, precisely by studying those things which natives are supposed not to have, such as religion.

When social anthropologists now, in Godfrey Lienhardt's words, 'study religious beliefs and practices in relation to particular social situations', they introduce an approach which can be applied to any society, and to any religion. When they suggest that 'religious knowledge and practice are ways in which men apprehend some truths, and adjust themselves to their condition in the light of that apprehension', they open a way to a rather different style of comparative religion from that adopted by the students of sacred texts. And when they observe that people's religious activities have often more in common in practice than have their 'conceptions of gods', they eliminate the evolutionary scale and make the 'native' peoples they study, not our contemporary ancestors, but our contemporaries.<sup>2</sup>

This is the approach taken by contributors to this volume in the study of 'vernacular Christianity'. A part of the aim is to disengage the notion of Christianity from that of 'the modern West' with which it has too often been unthinkingly linked, especially in representations of the non-Western world. The modern popular image of relations between the 'developed' and 'undeveloped' countries is still rooted in the nineteenth-century image of the European Christian gentleman bringing his revelation, with his rationality, technical wizardry and fair moral argument, to the unenlightened subject. In this volume we seek to displace this oppositional image. If the Christian religion is one way in which persons may apprehend some truths, there are

more than a few subtle variations in the apprehension of truth. There are, in fact, different ways in which Christianity itself is apprehended; for outside the authorizing institutions of the Churches and the texts of theological debate there is no Christianity except in the life of vernacular society and culture. We focus on some of the ways in which Christianity has been experienced, apprehended and expressed in 'native' terms; without such a 'native' appropriation, there cannot be a living religion.

By taking the vernacular expression of Christianity (in the cultural as well as the linguistic sense) as our central theme, we are plunged into some of the fundamental contrasts between the absolute claims made for the religion and the complicated history of its practice. There is a tension inherent in Christianity between the universal descent of the Holy Spirit and the cultural expression of Christian values, whether or not enshrined in the institutional forms of a given Church. That tension existed before Christianity began to transform itself from a Jewish sect into a religion of universal claim. Pentecost was perhaps the symbolic (if not the actual) recognition that if the Christian message were to spread, it must be translated into the idiom of other languages. The speaking in tongues may have been the beginning of 'vernacular Christianity' in a literal sense, but the evangelization of foreign communities, the removal of the barrier between Jew and Gentile, brought an immediate clash of cultural values in a more substantive sense. The Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul record this repeated conflict, not only between the early Christian community and the outside world, but within the community itself. How much of the Mosaic Law were the new Christians obliged to keep? How much Jewish culture were Gentile converts expected to adopt?

This conflict of expectations began before the advent of Christianity, with the appearance of scattered communities of 'God-fearers', ancient 'fellow travellers' who were attracted to Jewish worship but stopped short of circumcision and thus were not considered full proselytes. The Apostles not only accepted but welcomed these Gentiles into the Way: Peter by announcing an end to the distinction between 'clean and unclean' (Acts 10), Paul by declaring himself the apostle to 'the uncircumcised' (Gal. 2: 7). Both Peter and Paul proclaimed the supremacy of the Holy Spirit over the Law, though not without opposition from within the Christian community (Acts 15), and not without reservations on Peter's part (Gal. 2: 11–21).

Paul, through both the style and message of his preaching, can be said to have legitimized 'vernacular Christianity'; yet he also embodied the tensions between the universal and the local which together have helped to spread the Christian way. As Saul, the Benjamite, he was a highly educated Pharisee, a strict observer of the Law. Yet he was also a Roman citizen by birth, educated in Greek, and it was under his Greek name, Paul, that he bore witness to the Gentiles, appealing to them through Greek logic, philosophy and literary style. This, more than his relaxation of the rule of circumcision, marks him as the apostle of both the universality of the Holy Spirit and the validity of the vernacular expression of its acceptance.

1. See, for instance, Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1971, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294–1324* (transl. Barbara Bray), London: Scolar Press 1978, for two of the most stimulating and rewarding applications of social anthropological perspectives by historians.

2. R. Godfrey Lienhardt, 'Religion', in Harry L. Shapiro (ed.), *Man, Culture, and Society*, New York: Oxford University Press 1956, pp. 325–7.

However eclectic Paul's preaching was to his contemporaries, and however inspiring his eclecticism may now be to later generations of evangelists (see George Hagan below), there is a point at which the proclamation of universal faith and its necessary practical demonstration must take precedence over and alter local cultural idioms. The apostolic letter sent from Jerusalem instructing converts to abjure sacrificial meat and illicit marriages (Acts 15: 23-9) may have been a considerable simplification of the Mosaic Law, but the imposition of even just the marriage prohibitions listed in Leviticus was to have profound social implications outside the Jewish world. The Graeco-Roman world's adoption of the Jewish heritage, through the acceptance of the prophetic antecedents to Jesus, was to have a significant influence on its intellectual and cultural life.

'The Gospel accentuates contrasts', one comprehensive history of Christianity has declared.<sup>3</sup> The contrasts are there when a religion claiming universality attempts to supersede other religious traditions, at the same time necessarily attempting to validate its own truths according to the terms of the traditions it replaces. Such ironies were revealed all too clearly in the polyglot, urban, commercial milieu of Christianity's early expansion; in its simultaneous rejection and assimilation of paganism and philosophy; and in its spreading of Latin and Greek at the expense of local vernaculars in Western Europe and Asia Minor while encouraging literacy in previously unwritten vernaculars elsewhere. At the time of the founding of the Christian Church, classical paganism was dynamically syncretic. In setting up their absolute intellectual and theological opposition to paganism and philosophy, the early Christian apologists were aggressive in their claims to exclusive truth. Yet culturally, Christianity could not help but be syncretic. While the growing heartland of Christendom could absorb the contradictions and ironies, these remained sharply defined, even matters for open conflict and confrontation, at the expanding margins.

The Church, we are frequently told, is the creator of modern Western European civilization. Through it was mediated the heritage of the Roman Empire; from its patronage emerged the humanism of the Renaissance, which culminated in the rationality of the Enlightenment. It bound the whole of Europe together within a common structure. This interpretation of European history, however, post-dates European expansion. The assertion of an organic coherence of the Western world is part of Europe's reaction to its own expansion; an attempt to define retroactively its distinctive difference from those other races and civilizations it encountered and increasingly came to dominate. It is an academic interpretation intimately associated with an internal Christian perspective upon the past.<sup>4</sup> It defines and traces a universal theme, seeing in European civilization a providentially guided development

3. K. Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*. Vol. I, *Beginnings to 1500*, New York: Harper and Row 1975 (2nd edn.), p. 551.

4. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1961 [1946], pp. 49-50.

whose culmination is its apocalyptic challenge to the rest of the world, repeating Christ's challenge to all mankind. Through Europe, Christ (and civilization) is brought to the rest of the world, and the rest of the world must choose to submit or resist. Here Europe embodies Christ's words, 'I have not come to bring peace, but a sword' (Matt. 10: 34), and history is divided by that sword into two periods: *before* European expansion, and *after* the European arrival.

There are other ways of defining Europe. Fernand Braudel presents one which highlights the rich variety of experience which must be gathered together in the very attempt of identifying continuities. It is Braudel's contribution to remind us that Europe was a conglomeration of different worlds and different civilizations within those worlds. Each civilization was a product, not of one single dominant cultural feature, but of a combination of cultural features themselves only loosely related to each other while set in an enduring geographical context. Thus there were contemporary civilizations which were Christian—the Orthodox, Latin and Iberian—but they were not Christian in the same way. Nor were they totally opposed to or immune from the non-Christian civilizations on the Muslim periphery of the Mediterranean world. Indeed, the Orthodox Greeks chose to submit to the Muslim Turks rather than to the Catholics,<sup>5</sup> a decision we can more readily understand from Roger Just's description in this collection of persisting Greek attitudes towards Western Christianity.

We mention Braudel, not because we wish to expand or refine his theories, but because, as a historian, he has articulated a view of the enduring character of vernacular cultures—or civilizations—which helps orient our presentation of the comparative studies which follow. Each is concerned with a particular case of the context of 'Christian experience' or the appropriation of elements of 'Christian religion'. Christianity does not necessarily spread as an organic entity; partial elements, themes, symbols, practices, are characteristically taken up by a particular culture or civilization, ethnic, class, or interest group, at a particular time. 'Civilization' does not exist as a single ideal or a unitary phenomenon. Civilizations can overlap; they are not watertight. They are not easily mortal, but in Braudel's phrase are 'endlessly readapting themselves'. And in whatever way a civilization chooses to define itself at its centre, it is 'most often on the border that the most characteristic aspects, phenomena, or tensions can be found'. It is there, on the fringes of civilizations, that 'small sparks can set alight huge, long-lasting blazes'. The history of the contacts between civilizations may be a history of borrowings and even refusals, but not of a rise and fall. We are not dealing with a history of confrontations between ideal types.<sup>6</sup> These points are particularly relevant in our recalling the conjunction between the nineteenth-century imperial expansion of European

5. F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vol. ii, London: Fontana/Collins 1973, especially pp. 759-73, 824-34.

6. F. Braudel, 'The History of Civilizations: The Past Explains the Present', in *On History*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1980, especially pp. 181, 194, 202-3, 209-10.

nations, the changing definition of the 'pagan' world then, and that period's stimulation of the very subject of anthropology (themes explored in different ways by Talal Asad and Brian Street below).

Let us remember that the equation between 'Christendom' and Europe (more specifically Western Europe) is new. The early cradle and spread of Christianity was not Europe, but Asia Minor. By the time of Constantine's conversion, Christianity existed beyond the borders of the Roman Empire and was developing into numerous national Churches. Our modern study of 'Church history' is predicated on the assumption that there is, or once was, a universal Christian Church. Here again, an ideal is imposed on experience. There never was a Church. In the history of early Christian heresies, the Roman and Orthodox Churches emerged out of the struggle for political control, not just between the Western and Eastern empires, but over those small national Churches which existed on the fringes of empires: the Armenian, Georgian, Gothic, 'Assyrian' and other Churches. What remained beyond political control was shed as heretical. 'The Church' thus defined itself by reduction. 'Christendom' cannot really be said to have become a broadly inclusive and unifying concept until the explosion of Islam into the Mediterranean basin, claiming the old Christian heartland. In the struggle with Islam it was possible to contemplate alliances with the old heretical Churches, such as the Monophysites of Armenia and Nubia. But by the time of the first global expansion of Europe in the sixteenth century, 'Christendom' was equated with the provinces of the old Western, Latin, empire. 'Christendom' was Europe. Even Greece, now part of the Ottoman Empire, became classified as part of the 'Near East'.

By the mid-nineteenth century those European nations which were either already operating old empires, or expanding new ones, still defined themselves as Christian, but they had begun to separate the functions of government and trade from those of mission and faith. Christianity was seen as an entity in itself; an abstract entity to be compared with whole pagan religions, as comparable 'belief systems' on an evolutionary scale. This is a *modern* view. It finds its most extreme expression, and academic endorsement, in the rationalistic climate of the late nineteenth century.

The case-studies which follow are divided into three sections. The first includes a number of essays on 'old' vernacular styles so clearly exemplified in some Mediterranean Christian countries, a style of vernacular connection between social life, personal and cultural identity, and religion which predated the modern industrial revolution and modern imperialism. This style disappeared with political changes in state religion in some regions and gave way to the modern circumstances of industrial society in others, but it has survived in some parts of rural Europe, and even—though reformulated—in former outposts of the old Iberian empires. The essays consider modern Greece, medieval Nubia, modern Brazil, and Renaissance Spain and Italy.

We begin with Greece, where even remote villagers consider their church allegiance a part of their personal and national identity, while sometimes withholding themselves as individuals from its theological and disciplinary

jurisdiction. The essay is based on Roger Just's observations in today's rural Greece, but the attitudes he describes are known to date back many centuries. Here, perhaps, not much has changed by comparison with the changing character of 'religion' in the social history of north-western Europe. With Ahmed Al-Shahi's commentary on the complete disappearance of medieval Nubian Christianity in both public and personal expression, we must ponder the question of how a Christian civilization can disappear so completely. The culture of medieval Nubia persists on many levels, as the work of Jay Spaulding has shown,<sup>7</sup> but the political associations of Christianity rule out for modern Sudanese of the central Nile valley any overt recognition of this religion as a historical antecedent and cultural source. The real comparison perhaps is with the converse case of Just's Greece. The Greeks (and the northern Sudanese) do not view religion in the abstracted form of a self-sustaining theology separable from a national and political tradition and identity. It is what makes them 'Greek'. If to be Christian is to be Greek, then no one is a Christian in the fullest sense but the Greeks. For the modern Sudanese Nubians, Islam is equally a part of their national and personal identity. They might well feel that since they are Muslims, the ancient Nubians, who were Christian, cannot have been the 'same people' as themselves.

The disappearance of Christianity in Nubia raises the question of its co-existence with other religions in other parts of the early Christian world. Robin Lane Fox has recently shown how very rooted Christianity was in forms of existing, long-standing religious experience and expectation in ancient Mediterranean societies. It was only gradually, over several centuries, that the context of religious experience itself became Christianized, with the Christian appropriation, not only of pagan shrines, but of pagan prophecies, epiphanies and religious language.<sup>8</sup> This change was accelerated, in part, by political events. In the Brazil of John Ryle's essay the dominant political and social context has been Christian for more than four centuries. Catholicism is a component of citizenship for the modern Brazilians of Ryle's essay, as Orthodoxy is for modern Greeks. Yet, despite the pervasiveness of Catholicism, the religious experience of Afro-Brazilians still finds expression in old cults, self-consciously tracing their roots to a pagan past. Here the early confrontation between Brazilian Catholicism and African cults has given way to accommodation and even a degree of mutual appropriation. Pagan continuities can still be found within old, well-established, Christian traditions.

The next essay focuses upon the older Iberian world itself, the Spain of four centuries ago. Here we see that Spanish Catholicism was no stranger to the types of paradox which are now a part of Afro-Brazilian religious life. Lisón-Tolosana describes a women's religious movement firmly contained

7. Jay Spaulding, *The Heroic Age in Simar*, East Lansing, Michigan: African Studies Center, Michigan State University 1985 (Ethiopian Series, Monograph No. 15).

8. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century AD to the Conversion of Constantine*, London and New York: Viking/Alfred A. Knopf 1986.

within the patronage of royalty and authority, even Church authority, stranger perhaps to the modern eye than it was to contemporaries. Here there was room for paradoxes a later era might find difficult to accommodate: 'holy witches' and 'female priests'.

Jaynie Anderson's essay on Renaissance Italy also strikes a strange note for the modern Christian, but by analysing Old Testament and Apocryphal motifs as vehicles for the artistic expression of personal experience she reminds us that Christianity's cultural gift to Europe was not solely confined to the New Testament. Christianity brought with it not just the revelation of Jesus but the authority of the Hebrew patriarchs and prophets who preceded him. To many early Roman converts the antiquity of the prophets of Israel, whose prophecies Christ had come to fulfil, gave Christianity that added sanction of historical authority which the more recent Greek philosophers lacked.<sup>9</sup> The 'proof' of Christianity is dependent, in part, on acceptance of the Old Testament as history, and as part of one's own history. The stories of the Old Testament patriarchs have continued to appeal strongly to converts in other societies and are often used in ways which make the revelation of the New Testament more personally relevant—witness the Dinka Salim Wilson's claim to descent from the Hebrew patriarchs as described by Johnson and the Shona diviner Timothy's gleanings from Old Testament mythology as discussed by Bourdillon in this volume. They, like the Renaissance artists, found in the Old Testament tales a very personal message. Anderson's discussion of the artistic use of highly ambiguous head-hunting images in overtly 'religious' art suggests how very little these paintings might have to do with central conceptions or doctrines of faith. This artistic tradition illustrates vividly the problem which confronted the Renaissance church as one of the great patrons of early humanist scholars, philosophers and artists, that of reconciling Christianity with the application of classical and non-Christian ideas and motifs to contemporary 'style' in life and social experience. It is perhaps ironic that the modern conception of 'Christian civilization' draws very heavily on the humanistic expressions of the Renaissance; yet the widely occurring modern distinction between 'pagan' and 'Christian' would rule out any serious use of head-hunting imagery in self-representation by modern Christians, whether Dinka, Uduk, Hawaiian, or even Italian.

The surprise, even shock, we feel at the contents of religious art in the past is a consequence of the great change in our own perceptions of religion that took place in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. The essays by Talal Asad and Brian Street, which follow, both draw attention to the nineteenth-century redefinitions of religion. They help define the nature of the break between the pre-modern (represented here by varieties of the Mediterranean vernacular) and the modern world. Asad traces the roots of the Western notions of rite and ritual, showing that their modern English gloss as 'symbolic performance', shared by theological and anthropological language, has a surprisingly recent origin (in fact the late nineteenth century). Prior to this time, from the

medieval period up to the eighteenth century, 'ritual' meant a manual of instruction for the pragmatic performance of religious duties, 'rite' the body of practice of a given Church. The shift in meaning was related to a change in the notion of the person, for whom religious performance became an optional part of life, a demonstration of piety not to God but rather, perhaps, to fellow citizens. Religion in the pre-modern period was tangibly *in the world* in a manner that would positively come to smack of paganism to a nineteenth-century mind, intent upon the moral elevation of faith and the personal disengagement of the believer.

The link between rationalist theories of social evolution and Christian thinking in the nineteenth century is the theme of Brian Street's chapter on Captain Cook. The eighteenth-century Hawaiians were caught within a developing mesh of misunderstanding, created by European attitudes, as the death of Cook reverberated in the decades succeeding the event. As writers and commentators refined their views in the light of their growing evolutionary rationalism, a rationalism which ironically included contemporary Christian definitions of 'paganism', the Hawaiians were held to have revered Cook as a god. His death at their hands (capable of straightforward explanation if the earliest sources are read critically) acquired a religious significance which lent him quasi-martyrdom in European eyes. His death, like those perhaps of Gordon and other imperial legendary heroes, fed back into the vernacular Christianity of expanding Europe. While appropriating the person of their Christian representative, indeed dismembering him, the Hawaiians were not, however, engaging in spiritual combat on quite the same terms as were being laid down by Victorian England.

The industrial, political and intellectual revolutions of the last century began to draw that sharp dividing line between what are now termed the 'developed' and the 'developing' worlds. The nineteenth century lies like a geological fault, separating the past from its proper understanding by the present, defining our still-pervasive perceptions of 'the primitive' and 'the civilized'. In so far as we take for granted the modern imperial context of 'Christian' relations with the rest of the world, we are prisoners, in an intellectual and moral sense, of a recent European heritage. The imperial high noon was an important influence on the modern intellectual climate in which so many of us trained in social anthropology or history learned to perceive the 'pagan' worlds of those subject to European control and to assume, almost inevitably, that the relationship between Christianity and the world 'outside' is one of confrontation. This representation stems in part from an old Christian ideal, that Christianity is a challenge to the unredeemed individual soul. But it is also part of the vernacular Christianity of late imperial, industrial Europe. It is not surprising that the erosion of modern empires has challenged the validity of this confrontational picture. At the same time, Christianity has not been thrown out in its entirety by post-colonial societies; the scattered seed has found root in a variety of ways, some of them unpredictable, as elements of the 'taught' religion have been appropriated in a selective manner.

The third group of essays in this volume deals, in a variety of mainly African

9. Latourette, *History of Christianity*, p. 84.



contexts, with the consequences of the imperial encounter for the way in which Christianity was and is still being received by former subjects of European control. The old Christianity of Nubia, being enmeshed with the authority of the state itself, did not survive the installation of a new orthodoxy. At that time, it was scarcely possible for a disengaged Christian 'religion' to remain after Islamic conquest as an optional spiritual allegiance: such a retention would have required a secular state. But the retention of a moral and spiritual Christianity taught under modern empire, and the redevelopment of that religion, are indeed options open to citizens of today's secularly defined states which have succeeded European rule in Africa. Christianity inherited through the nineteenth- and twentieth-century empires is outlasting the political framework of its transmission, perhaps partly because it was often presented as 'pure religion', distanced from political and other secular institutions. Where Christianity was never separated, as a disembodied 'religion', from the institutional structures of state authority, political change has sometimes blown away the official religion of the previous regime, as in Christian Nubia. But where there was no necessary organic link with state and secular life and the 'religious' sphere was defined autonomously, Christianity has become available for appropriation into a variety of new circumstances. There is on the ground a wide range of variation in the emphasis given to different strands in the selective adoption and practice of 'the faith'. There may be found a series of exclusive definitions of faith and of church membership, while membership of a particular church can become a part of the assertion of ethnic and political identity.

Eva Gillies' essay on the social and political context of conversion in the middle Niger belt illustrates the complexity of the 'conversion experience' on any part of the expanding Christian frontier. She emphasizes the local factors of ethnic loyalty and cultural interpretation which shape the very expansion of that frontier. Paul Heelas and Anna Marie Haglund-Heelas remind us of the inadequacy of modern sociological theories about 'deprivation' as a fundamental cause of conversion in the mission field. These theories have characteristic roots in utilitarian thought, and the critique clears the way for a fuller consideration of the problem. Conversion seems only rarely to involve the total acceptance of a new faith, or the complete transformation of religious expectation.

A complex process of the selective ingestion of partial elements of Christian discourse and practice has clearly taken place in some 'missionized' areas since the retreat of colonial rule, when a wide range of religious options may be open to newly independent peoples. Michael Bourdillon illustrates how selected themes from biblical myth have been adopted by non-Christians in rural Zimbabwe and woven into the vernacular corpus; Wendy James points to the easy adoption and elaboration of Christian songs and music by a wide range of Uduk-speakers in the Sudan whose formal Christian allegiance, especially after the departure of the missionaries, may remain rather vague; and George Hagan describes the search for direct spiritual experience among Christians in southern Ghana, a guarantee of authenticity which they draw from their

pre-Christian tradition. Francis Deng's essay provides a uniquely rich insight into the way in which the Dinka have drawn on their own moral and religious tradition in responding to Christian teaching, at first optimistically, though now less so. Douglas Johnson traces the careers of various Dinka who left their homes, or rather were obliged to leave them, and who became religious teachers elsewhere. In particular, the story of Salim Wilson, who became a writer and a preacher in Yorkshire, can be told in some detail, detail which suggests how closely he retained an inspiration from the religious education he had experienced as a boy in Dinkaland. He shared with several other Dinka 'missionaries' abroad—including Deng Lakka, a prophet among the Nuer—a claim to spiritual authority deriving ultimately from the Dinka tradition of birth to a priestly lineage.

Because of the tendency to think in terms of an opposition between the Christian religion and those other domains of belief and practice into which it has been introduced, ethnographic studies of 'traditional' religion have perhaps over-drawn the distinctiveness, and separateness, of their subject-matter, and historians have thought too much in terms of a holistic confrontation of systems. Over a decade ago Terence Ranger warned against the 'dangerously misleading' representation of 'an essential African religion confronting an essential Christianity' and proposed a 'more particularist' history of the development of African Christianity which took account of 'the social context of its practitioners and evangelists'.<sup>10</sup> In a recent lengthy review of current studies of religious movements (both 'traditional' and Christian) in relation to politics in sub-Saharan Africa, Ranger takes his focus even further from conventional church or mission history. By 'movements', he means 'widespread and grassroots adherence to religious ideas, symbols and rituals, sometimes brief in duration, sometimes long-lasting; sometimes lacking and sometimes acquiring formal organizational structures'; he deals with 'the idioms of rural understanding and creativity' and with 'questions of "popular consciousness" rather than with the development of formal theologies'.<sup>11</sup> He seeks to illustrate tendencies in the recent Africanist literature of history and related disciplines in the social sciences which are converging upon a newly complex apprehension of religious politics in rural areas. A broad consensus is traced in which continuities from the pre-colonial past are recognized; in which the richness of religious response is not reduced to anti-colonial and nationalist political feeling; and in which the particular consciousness of rural people in penetrating and formulating the nature of their own situation is acknowledged.<sup>12</sup> Here is a field of enquiry to be fruitfully shared by the historian and the social anthropologist; and it is by no means limited to the

10. Terence O. Ranger, in T. O. Ranger and J. Weller (eds.), *Introduction to Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1975, pp. 5, 11, 86.

11. Terence O. Ranger, 'Religious Movements and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa', *African Studies Review*, Vol. XXIX, no. 2 (1986), pp. 1-69, at p. 1.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

African field, as Professor Ranger's own comments on the recent collection *Frontiers of Christian Evangelism* remind us.<sup>13</sup>

The end of empire has made visible more subtle patterns of encounter than those which dominated our earlier perceptions of the Christian and the non-Christian. The 'native' has in places appropriated Christianity in such a way as to become more Christian than the former imperial master. This reminds us that Christianity itself in 'the West' has not always reflected an imperial view of the world, and indeed that for parts of its own (even recent) history it has been anti-imperial. Nor is the political aspect of Christianity always the most illuminating approach to its comparative interpretation; the personal, moral and intimate spiritual questions which have so often been pursued within the discourse of theology proper have less often been taken up in writings about Christianity in Africa, for example. But these come more easily to the fore in today's more open and personal approach to matters of comparative faith. Several of the essays in this book trace the particular circumstances of individual people in their encounter with, and appropriation of, Christian belief and practice. A pervasive theme is easier to trace at this personal level than perhaps at the level of the confrontation with 'culture' or 'society'. Christian identity, as a confession of faith, does not bring with it or produce cultural and social uniformity; but because, as a personal experience, it inevitably goes with a characteristic sense of particular place or time, the theme of personal religious identity cannot be separated from that vernacular context. In this sense, every Christian is a native.

13. Terence O. Ranger, 'An Africanist Comment', in Jane Schneider and Shirley Lindenbaum (eds.), *Frontiers of Christian Evangelism*, Special Issue of *American Ethnologist*, Vol. XIV, no. 1 (1987), pp. 182-5.

PART I  
OLD VERNACULAR STYLES  
OF THE CHRISTIAN WORLD