

## PREFACE

IN introducing this collection of essays we would like to recall some observations Godfrey Lienhardt made over thirty years ago about the study of religion. He quoted Dr Samuel Johnson's sharp rebuke to a gentleman who wished to study the religion of the natives of New Zealand. "And what account of their religion can you suppose to be learnt from savages?" asks Dr Johnson. "Only consider, sir, our own state. Our religion is in a book; we have an order of men whose duty it is to teach: we have one day in the week set apart for it, and this in general pretty well-observed; Yet ask the first ten gross men you meet, and hear what they can tell of their religion."

It was clear that for Johnson, an eighteenth-century rationalist, 'the fullness of religion lay in the presence of a theology and a church', and the study of religion lay in the study of the learned understanding of doctrine. 'This has not been the view of anthropologists,' Lienhardt remarked in his 1956 essay,

it is true that some of the main differences between the tribal religions of non-literate peoples, and those religions with literate traditions, are as Johnson stated: but a religion is something more than that part of it which appears in its sacred scriptures and in written commentaries upon them. These represent what people know and are prepared to say about their religion when they reflect upon it; we need also to understand how their religion figures in the ordinary conduct of their lives. To learn what a people say about their religion is not always the same thing as to know how they practice it.<sup>1</sup>

Dr Johnson's attitude can still be found today among those students of comparative religion who rely on the authority of sacred writings, or among 'Church historians' who equate the study of religion with the study of 'the Church'. But anthropologists, as Lienhardt pointed out, study 'religious beliefs and practices in relation to particular social situations; and what people do in particular situations is not always consistent with what they are prepared, on reflection, to say they believe'.<sup>2</sup> It is because of this inconsistency that scholars who base their theories solely on ethnographic descriptions of orally transmitted doctrine, creed and cosmological belief represent the worlds of 'primitive peoples' as markedly different from those of 'universal' religions.

1. R. Godfrey Lienhardt, 'Religion', in Harry L. Shapiro (ed.), *Man, Culture, and Society*, New York: Oxford University Press 1956, pp. 310-11.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 325.

Yet, as Lienhardt had earlier remarked, this stereotype of 'primitive peoples' was contrary to reality; for 'scepticism and an ironical recognition of the ambiguities of human experience and knowledge are undoubtedly found among them'.<sup>3</sup> Even pagan religious experts, who were thought to be the fount of religious knowledge, could display (contrary to earlier expectations of 'primitive' religion) a blend of faith and scepticism. Religious beliefs were the product not simply of traditional teaching, but of the will, and the reason, being brought to bear upon that teaching in the context of experience.<sup>4</sup>

In focusing on religious experience and practice and in recognizing that scepticism is an inevitable companion to reasoning about faith, Lienhardt was able to suggest that the behaviour of people has often more in common than is apparent from their conceptions of gods.<sup>5</sup> This humane understanding informed his own major field monograph, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (published by the Clarendon Press in 1961), which has become, over the last quarter of a century, a modern classic in the social anthropological study of religion. In it, he demonstrated in an African religion the sort of complexity and depth which he had already evoked in general terms. *Divinity and Experience* (now reissued in paperback) has had a marked impact on the study of African religions, and it is beginning to influence the study of religious practice and experience elsewhere, including regions of the Christian heartland. Godfrey Lienhardt has recently turned his own attention to the way in which missionaries operated among, and were received by, the Dinka, and it is from his study of 'The Dinka and Catholicism' (published in 1982) that several of the essays in this volume take their particular lead.<sup>6</sup> In that paper Lienhardt asks, 'What kind of translation, as it were, of experience was required for a Dinka to become a nominal or believing Christian?' He proceeds to answer that question by examining the Dinka experience of a world in which Christianity had increasingly become established and suggests that 'the acceptance of the Church came through foreign secular ideas of progress and development, for the most part material, which had little to do with the main evangelical purposes or teaching of the missions'. Such ideas in the context of translation, along with new theological doctrine and notions of the human personality and soul, came to be ambivalently a part of the Dinka world through 'a kind of linguistic parallax' (the apparent displacement, or change, of objects in space as they are seen from different points of observation). Mutual redefinitions of Dinka words and meanings could in this way lead to

3. R. G. Lienhardt, 'Modes of Thought', in E. E. Evans-Pritchard *et al.*, *The Institutions of Primitive Society*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1954, p. 103.

4. R. G. Lienhardt, 'Religion', pp. 321-2.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

6. R. G. Lienhardt, 'The Dinka and Catholicism', in J. Davis (ed.), *Religious Organization and Religious Experience*, London and New York: Academic Press 1982 (ASA Monographs, no. 21), pp. 81-95.

new doctrinal orthodoxy where the authority of selected persons to define and maintain it was acknowledged.

The gulf between the study of 'universal' and 'primitive' religions is not what it was thirty years ago. Not only have anthropologists increasingly applied their methods of enquiry to communities living within the compass of the 'revealed' religions, but theologians and biblical scholars have taken a greater interest in anthropological literature and lay perspectives upon the sociology of religious questions and sacred texts. As examples representing the wide range of rethinking in this field, we might mention the collection of essays edited by Bernhard Lang, *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia and London 1985), and the special 1987 issue of *American Ethnologist* on 'Frontiers of Christian Evangelism'. Comparative religion is beginning to take account of the experiences and practices of Johnson's 'gross men', within as well as outside the domain of 'Church history'.

Godfrey Lienhardt has played a quiet but sustained part in the achievement of this change, not only through the example of his writings, but through his personal encouragement of younger scholars in social anthropology and a variety of related fields. In particular, in recent years he has organized a series of colloquia in collaboration with colleagues in theology and European social history, which have helped extend anthropological thinking about the older, as well as the newer, provinces of Christendom. It is for these reasons that we dedicate the present volume on the theme of 'vernacular Christianity' to him as a gift on the occasion of his retirement from formal duties as Reader in Social Anthropology at the University of Oxford. We have brought together a number of essays from former students and others who have found inspiration in his work and whose own research has been sufficiently close to the general theme for the making of a coherent study. Our fellow contributors join us in offering this token collection in acknowledgement of an indebtedness and as representative of an affection felt by a much wider range of persons than could actually be included here.

W.J.  
D.H.J.

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The frontispiece of Godfrey Lienhardt appears by courtesy of Wolfson College, Oxford, where Godfrey is currently a Professorial Fellow and was Vicegerent in 1973-5. The cover illustrations of elders from the Revelation of St John are based on photographs that were kindly provided by Dr Jonathan Kingdon; we are most grateful to him for bringing them to our attention as suitable representations for the theme of this book. They are from a series of ceiling panels portraying these twenty-four elders to be found in St Francis Chapel, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda. The panels were painted by Ignatius Sserulyo, who came to Oxford in 1982 as a Visiting Artist at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art; subsequently some of his work was also exhibited at Wolfson College.

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