

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10411-1 - Religion and the Transformation of Society: A Study  
in Social Change in Africa

Monica Wilson

Excerpt

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## I. CHANGE IN SCALE

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The Scott Holland Lectures began with a study of the relation between religious and economic change: *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. I dare follow on with reflections on the relation between religion and the radical social changes of our time, not only economic changes.

There are two characteristics of contemporary change in society: rapidity and pervasiveness. Social change has often been a 'shy sideways, crablike movement' (it is E. M. Forster's description) but in our day Cancer turns to Pegasus, and bolts, as Dr Leach has shown.<sup>1</sup>

I start with four assumptions. First, that there are regularities in the social field. Here anthropologists and sociologists differ from many (though not all) historians who are so preoccupied with the uniqueness of events that they doubt the existence of regularities in history. Anthropologists watching many and diverse societies cannot escape the conclusion that there are regularities. Our chief tool is *comparison*; like the zoologists from whom we sprang in Cambridge, we find it useful to compare related sorts and to inquire into the reasons for the detailed variations.

The second assumption is that if there are regularities these are discoverable.

The third, that there are conditions of social living comparable, in some degree, to biological conditions of life.

The fourth assumption is that different aspects of a society are interdependent, but that they have a relative autonomy.

Let us examine more closely the assumption that there are

<sup>1</sup> E. R. Leach, *A Runaway World?* The Reith Lectures, 1967 (London, 1968).

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conditions of social living. Certain institutions *must* exist; that is, we have not found a society without them and until we do, the hypothesis that they are a condition of social living holds. There is always a family of some sort – parents and children – though the degree to which this elementary group is detached from a wider kinship unit, and the part taken by the father in providing for wife and child and training the children, varies. There is always a wider community of some sort also, whether it is a hunting band or a pastoral horde, or a village or town, and children may grow up almost as dependent on their age-mates as on kin. What has been peculiar to urban middle-class Europe is the degree to which parents and young children have been isolated from a wider kin group and from neighbours. A middle-class suburban house became a citadel in a way in which a room in a slum tenement or a hut in an African village was not. There is always law and custom: we need not delay to discuss the line between different sorts of obligatory behaviour, and the sanctions that enforce it, but everywhere individuals are obliged to observe certain rules within their community. There is always a system of beliefs, and judgement on right and wrong, and the celebration of rituals or ceremonials expressing beliefs and values, which together make up a people's religion or ideology.

Whether or not they believe in a transcendental God, men make assumptions about the intrinsic nature of the universe which guide their choices in everyday affairs: life after death exists or does not exist; man succeeds by his own exertions or by the grace of God; what happens to the individual is accident or design; love is stronger than hate or it is not. The notion that a man can exist without making any assumptions, and without making choices based on assumptions, is false. It is comparable to supposing that an anthro-

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pologist can make an investigation without any preconceived ideas. Language itself means that he starts with certain classifications, certain categories of thought.

From the point of view of the anthropologist all ultimate beliefs are comparable whether they assert or deny the existence of God. Humanists, Marxists, and Christians alike have ultimate beliefs and values to which everyday choices are related. From the point of view of the Christian those societies with transcendental beliefs – which assert a reality beyond what we can touch and see or measure – are distinct. In these lectures I use *religion* to mean transcendental beliefs and values, and rituals which express them; and *ideology* to mean ultimate beliefs and values which deny the existence of any transcendental reality.<sup>1</sup> Such beliefs and values are also expressed in symbolic action which I call *ceremonial*, distinguishing it from *ritual* which refers to some supposed transcendental reality. These are rough and ready distinctions but convenient for my purpose.

Systems of beliefs and values and the celebration of rituals are but the wrapping of personal religion – of a man's inner life – his relations with God and his neighbour; but the expression in dogma, action, and ritual are all that the outsider sees, and therefore all that the anthropologist can analyse.

The line between biological and social necessity is not sharp, for animal groups have many of the same basic needs as human groups, as will be shown later.

The fourth assumption, that different aspects of a society are interdependent but have a relative autonomy, is particularly pertinent to a study of religion. A series of African societies which have been described by anthropologists –

<sup>1</sup> In this terminology *apartheid* in South Africa is religion not ideology, since it is spoken of as the creation of God.

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the Nuer, the Dinka, the Lugbara, the Bemba, the Ndembu, the Nyakyusa, and many others – show a clear connection between religious forms and the whole society.<sup>1</sup> Such a connection is generally accepted by anthropologists.<sup>2</sup> But there is no absolute determination of religion by technology, economy, kinship grouping, or political structure. One cannot read off the religion from the economy, or the economy from the religion, though each shapes the other. One of the problems for anthropologists is to measure this autonomy, first by comparing a series of societies with similar economies (e.g. a series of hunting peoples, or of subsistence cultivators), and analysing how their religious beliefs and practices differ, and secondly by observing how religion changes as hunters become herders, or cultivators, or herders become machine minders. The symbols change – the attributes of God, or gods, the nature of the offerings to them – the location of the altar, the worshipping group (i.e. those who pray together), and the values expressed, but some of the old dogmas may remain.

Thus a family which has been used to expressing itself in terms of a pastoral economy, finding itself unable to celebrate traditional rituals in towns, substitutes a birthday party or commemoration dinner in place of the traditional sacrifice of an animal after birth and after a funeral, but members may still pray to the shades of their ancestors. In spite of piles of mission reports and anthropological books which discuss religion, we have few detailed accounts of how religious

<sup>1</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford, 1956), *passim*; G. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience* (Oxford, 1961), *passim*; J. Middleton, *Lugbara Religion* (London, 1960), *passim*; Monica Wilson, *Communal Rituals of the Nyakyusa* (London, 1959), pp. 216-23.

<sup>2</sup> C. Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System', in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (ed. M. Benton, London, 1966), pp. 1-2.

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beliefs and practices have actually changed in a given community. It is only through comparative studies of this sort that we can define how far autonomy of the religious aspect has extended.

There is a curious inclination to suppose that religious, but not scientific, ideas are invalidated by being related to society. Ideas are not necessarily untrue because they have been shaped by the society in which they emerge. What is false is to suppose they can escape reformulation as societies change. Christ specifically taught that his revelation was not complete: 'I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth.'<sup>1</sup> To me this implies two things: first that creeds are as tentative as scientific hypotheses. The difficulty is to recognize that the reality does not depend upon the formulation: God exists though men quarrel over his attributes. An honest Christian may struggle all his life with doubts;<sup>2</sup> we are past the dogmatic certainty of medieval or Victorian times and back to the position of John's disciples who, when sent to ask Jesus who he was, were told to look at the evidence for themselves. 'Tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how the blind see and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached.'<sup>3</sup>

The second implication is that the awe-inspiring discoveries of science are part of the leading of the Spirit. They are indeed a fruit of men looking at the evidence.

<sup>1</sup> John 16: 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 9:24. Cf. L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London, 1966), p. 98: 'The life of faith is a continually renewed victory over doubt.'

<sup>3</sup> Luke 7:20-2.

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You will notice that anthropologists and theologians are asking different questions. The theologians ask whether a given belief is true or false. The anthropologist asks how it is related to other aspects of the society, and what effect it has on social relationships. Theologians of every society and every generation incline to think they have the final answer. Anthropologists sometimes speak as if they had also, though our studies are still in swaddling clothes. It is only seventy years since systematic fieldwork began.

In their investigations of small societies most anthropologists have used static models: that is they have pretended that the societies they were observing were not changing. Even some of the very best studies on Africa, such as that on the Nuer, have been distorted in this way. Nuer religion cannot be comprehended without taking account of the Christian kingdom of Nubia that existed on the Upper Nile until the sixteenth century,<sup>1</sup> for the difference between Nuer ideas of God, and those of peoples further south in Africa, is only intelligible in terms of Nuer history.

In these lectures, therefore, I try to look at societies in two dimensions; to analyse functional relations in space and in time. This is very difficult. E. M. Forster warned long ago of the danger of referring 'improperly' to time.<sup>2</sup> The historians concentrate on what happened – the succession of events – and the best of them demonstrate *why* things happened, analysing connections in time. The anthropologists have concentrated on *what is*, and the interaction of existing institutions. Both approaches meet in direct observation, and the first lecturer in this series, Tawney, once said: 'What historians need is not more documents but stronger boots.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A. J. Arkel, *A History of the Sudan to 1821* (London, 1955), p. 197.

<sup>2</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London, 1927), p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted, W. K. Hancock, *Country and Calling* (London, 1954), p. 95.

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We anthropologists are good on boots: we have been walking about Africa and other places for some time. So there is hope of a fruitful marriage between studies in time and in space.

Anthropologists have long pressed the advantage of using small-scale models about which the relevant facts can be encompassed in one lifetime, but to be useful the model must be one that *moves*. I shall use some of the small societies of Africa as they move from isolation to wider interaction to demonstrate the part played by religion in society, and how that part changes. I take heed of Forster, but press on all the same.

It is argued that the most general change going on in society is a change in scale, i.e. a change in the number of people interacting and the closeness of their interaction.<sup>1</sup> There is general agreement among anthropologists about the reality of increase in numbers of people interacting: not only are formerly isolated societies drawn into wider relations, but there is cumulative increase in population. Both processes have been most conspicuous during the past four hundred years. Changes in the nature of interaction are more debatable. Durkheim thought that the total amount of interaction increased: that people grew more and more dependent upon one another. It can be argued that the amount of interaction remains constant, but is more or less spread out, for as villagers begin to depend upon the world of strangers, they are less dependent upon each other, and on their kinsfolk in the same or other villages.<sup>2</sup> But whether Durkheim or his critics are right, none doubt that people interact in wider and wider circles; that this applies to more people as education and travel become more common, no longer the

<sup>1</sup> G. and M. Wilson, *The Analysis of Social Change* (Cambridge, 1945).

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 25-30, 39-41.

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preserve of clerics, or literati; and that trade with what were once remote villages swells.

The increase in scale applies in time as well as in space. Small societies have a short time depth, all history being squeezed into ten or twelve generations. I knew people who were convinced that their ancestors had been without fire ten generations ago.<sup>1</sup> For them time began then. Literate societies have a longer time depth, and it is conspicuous that as they expand in space, time stretches back. The exploration of space and the exploration of the past go hand in hand, and in our generations both have been dependent upon developments in mathematics and physics. Radio-carbon dating has stretched our view of history as satellites have explored the universe. Men land on the moon and man the tool-maker is traced back one-and-a-half million years in Africa. Whether archaeologists are reporting on Africa, America, or Oceania, one phrase recurs: 'Dating has been revised. These tools are much earlier than was supposed.'

Men's view of history depends upon the society in which they live. In the small isolated societies the golden age is always in the past, and conservatism which, after all, is a condition of survival in a preliterate society, is highly valued. What is lost by one generation among preliterate people is lost for good. Change occurs, but often it is slow, and people may not admit to changing at all. Survivors from a Dutch ship, wrecked off the southern coast of Africa in 1686, spent three years among the Xhosa people, and learnt to speak the language.<sup>2</sup> After their rescue these men gave a detailed account of the Xhosa people to the Commander of the Cape. If that account is compared with eye-witness reports

<sup>1</sup> M. Wilson, *Communal Rituals*, pp. 1-16.

<sup>2</sup> D. Moodie, *The Record*, 1838-42 (reprint Cape Town, 1960).



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of the mid-nineteenth century it can be shown that Xhosa society had changed remarkably little during nearly two hundred years. Moreover the Xhosa constantly defended their customs as being the customs of their ancestors – *amasiko*. They identified piety with conservatism.

A large-scale society is quite different. In it the Kingdom of Heaven, or a secular Utopia, lies in the future. Heaven is something towards which men strive. A messiah is awaited. Development in techniques and in scientific knowledge is valued, and spoken of as ‘progress’. Many Victorians thought ‘progress’ applied to the moral field also, and my generation was dismayed when two wars and the horrors of concentration camps showed how hate as well as love might be nourished by growing knowledge and skill. The expectation of change is sometimes distorted into a cult of novelty, change being sought for its own sake. But without such exaggerations, the recognition that a society is fluid, that men themselves have the power to shape it, is itself a force for change, and responsibility in a revolutionary age implies acceptance of that power. Dr Leach’s admonition to accept the responsibility of power was plain behind the fireworks of his Reith lectures.

It is a mistake to suppose that history has been recognized as significant only in Hebrew and Christian societies. Whether in a small community of cultivators or a great civilization like that of China, what is told as history always provides some sort of social charter. But the charter may be static: it may describe a single revolution, such as the arrival of chiefs, or of a ruling aristocracy which differed in race, and this single event is conceived as setting history for all time, because the duty of descendants is to follow exactly the pattern set by the fathers. There are numerous examples of this from Africa. Or the charter may define a cyclical

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view of history, in which each dynasty is thought of as making all things new, as Dr Needham has shown.<sup>1</sup>

The linear view of history which assumes a continuous *development* is spoken of by some theologians as peculiarly Christian. I suggest it is linked with increase in scale and that it appears in non-Christian societies also. You will remember that St Paul gained a ready hearing in Athens because Athenians of the first century A.D. already had a passion for something new,<sup>2</sup> and Dr Needham has shown that the expectation of development – cumulative advance – was there in nineteenth-century China.<sup>3</sup> But there is a measure of autonomy between men's relations in society and the ideas they conceive. The story of the Garden of Eden is a typical myth of a small society. The leap to a much wider view appears in Isaiah,<sup>4</sup> in an Israel which was indeed literate and trading through the Mediterranean and North Asia, and eastward to India, but was not yet wide-scale in a modern sense. Religious understanding was far ahead of the everyday pattern of social relationships.

Sir Kenneth Clark has suggested that the mark of civilization is 'a sense of permanence',<sup>5</sup> and he sees its expression primarily in stone buildings and in books. Permanence was thought of in Africa in terms of the lineage which continued through time, and which was symbolized by breeding stock, the succouring clump of bananas, or the cutting taken from a tree on a grave and planted in the new homestead when men moved. The trees surrounding a chief's grave formed a

<sup>1</sup> J. Needham, *Time and Eastern Man* (Royal Anthropological Institute, London, 1965), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 17:21.

<sup>3</sup> Needham, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 14:32. Cf. G. Adam Smith, *The Book of Isaiah* (London, 1896), I, 282-7.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Civilization* (London, 1970), p. 14.