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Robin Horton

Excerpt

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Introduction

I

When I originally decided on the title of this book, it seemed to me to have two virtues: first, accurate indication of the book's contents; and second, absence of the flashy gimmickry so prevalent amongst modern social-anthropological book titles. Now, looking through the eyes of a sceptical would-be reader, I feel less easy with it. It has overtones of a somewhat nutty attempt to make sense of everything under the sun. So perhaps the best way to introduce the book is with an apologia for its title.

As regards the 'Africa' part of the title, little needs to be said. The train of thought pursued in these essays was triggered, in the first instance, by two periods of ethnographic fieldwork in Africa: an early and relatively short period in Nike in northern Igboland; and a later and much longer (indeed still continuing) period in Kalabari in the eastern Niger Delta.¹ In both areas, I was drawn, for a variety of reasons, to the religious aspect of the life of the peoples I encountered. Reflection on my fieldwork findings led me in two directions. First, to comparative reading in the religious ethnography of sub-saharan Africa, guided by the aim of establishing the representativeness or otherwise of my fieldwork materials. Second, to the search for a theoretical framework which would be adequate to the interpretation of the religious life of the peoples of my fieldwork areas and of other parts of the continent. This search, in turn, led on the one hand to disappointment with existing theoretical frameworks, and on the other to the quest for something more promising. The critical and the constructive essays in this book represent, respectively, the disappointment and the more positive quest that accompanied it.

So much for 'Africa'. What of 'the West'? Here, I think, a somewhat more extended explanation is required. For the reader will surely want some solid reasons as to why the West was dragged into the title of a book whose alleged primary inspiration was the religious life of Africa. In what follows, I shall offer three principal reasons.

First of all, in both my critical and my constructive work, I had to take

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account of the basic realities of the comparative study of human thought-systems. Particular thought-systems of particular peoples had to be brought to the notice of the widest possible audience. And comparisons between such thought-systems required a standard, universally-current medium. Both of these considerations dictated that the thought-systems of the various peoples of the world be translated into terms of a 'world' language. And for the time being, 'world' language meant Western language.

Now since translation involved finding equivalences of intention and structure between source-language and target-language, it followed that the scholar in quest of the appropriate translation instruments for African religious thought had to be prepared to enquire deeply into the intentions and structures embodied in various areas of Western discourse. This meant his spending a lot of time and effort in activities which were similar to or even indistinguishable from those of the analytic philosopher whose primary concern was with Western discourse.²

Here, then, is one reason why, in several of the papers in the present volume, the reader will find, as an integral part of the discussion of how to develop an appropriate framework for the interpretation of African religious thought, a searching scrutiny of various types and aspects of Western discourse.

A second aspect of my enquiry which forced me to reflect on Western thought and life was the quest for contrast cases. The purpose of this quest was two-fold. First, to sort out what was common to African and perhaps all thought-systems, from what was distinctive of Africa. Second, to help test my answers to the explanatory question: given the pervasive importance of certain features of content and mode of thought in African cultures, what factors in the technological, economic and socio-political context contribute to sustaining these features?

Now the besetting sin of many writers on African thought-systems has been to treat as unique many features which in fact are much more widely shared or even universal. And the besetting sin of many modern social anthropologists has been the tendency to set up elaborate explanatory frameworks on the base of monographic studies of single cultures or regional groups of cultures, without due concern for the kind of wider comparisons which might at least begin to test these frameworks. These were sins of which I became aware at an early stage of my induction into African Studies and Social Anthropology, and which I was determined to avoid. As I said earlier, although I started out from a mere two bodies of ethnographic findings, I quickly embarked on a programme of comparative reading which gave me an Africa-wide perspective. At that stage, however, I had no clear idea of what African thought-systems shared with the rest of the world, and what, if anything, was unique to them. Only extra-African

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contrast cases could throw light on this matter. Again, although my initial explanatory hunches had received encouraging confirmation from my broader reading, I was still dealing only with parallel cases involving similar manifestations of thought conjoined with similar contextual backgrounds. And as all those with scientific pretensions have recognized since John Stuart Mill, the accumulation of confirmatory parallel cases needs to be supplemented by a determined search for contrast cases, in which the phenomena to be explained are absent, and of which one must ask whether or not the contextual features alleged to constitute their causal backgrounds are also absent.³ It was the search for such cases that drove me, once again, to the thought-world of the West.

With its highly secularized world-view and its modernistic mode of thought, the West, at first glance, stood in spectacular contrast with a spiritual and traditionalistic Africa. What could have been a more promising setting in which to clarify one's ideas about universals and uniqueness? What more promising setting in which to test one's hunches about cause and context? In the event, the exercise did throw useful if unexpected light on the question of universals and peculiarities. Further, the element of genuine contrast in content and mode of thought was revealed as being accompanied by some equally striking contextual contrasts; and this finding did at least something to corroborate my initial explanatory hunches. The exercise also had a fruitful spin-off as regards understanding of the West. For, by corollary, some features of Western thought often taken for granted by scholars were highlighted when viewed against the African background. Again, some relations between the content, mode and context of this thought, which might otherwise have remained in shadow, stood out dramatically when so viewed.

A third factor which drew me into reflection on modern Western thought was my curiosity about the roots of the theories of scholars engaged in this field. As someone fired with curiosity as to *why* people thought as they did, I moved easily from pondering the influence of socio-cultural context on the creators and sustainers of African systems of thought to pondering the influence of this context on those who theorized about such systems. Following this path, I came to think of socio-cultural and personal background as exercising its influence upon scholars in two ways.

First, it determined the translational resources which a scholar brought to his task. Philosophers such as Quine had tended to talk as though the would-be translator had at his beck and call an infinity of resources with which to embark on his task, and as though his problem was one of an *embarras de richesses*.⁴ In fact, however, it seemed that the situation was rather the reverse of this. For the typical would-be translator in the real world had a decidedly limited array of resources with which to work, and

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had to make the best use he could of this limited array. The limits to the means at his disposal, of course, were set not only in a general way by the culture out of which he operated, but also more specifically by his personal position within this culture and by his personal educational history.

Secondly, the factor of background exerted its influence through the ideology with which it endowed the scholar. Ideology had long been defined as ideas in the service of wishes. And an important component of an individual's ideology was what he wanted to believe about the relation between other cultures and his own. Once again, moreover, what he wanted to believe in this area was shaped by the culture out of which he operated and by his position in this culture.

To avoid misunderstanding, I should perhaps stress here that I always saw the background factor as something that should be taken into account in trying to understand not only theories that were obviously at variance with the phenomena, but also those that seemed to accord well with them. I found it generally accepted that obviously inadequate theories could be explained by pointing out how, whilst the phenomena pulled in one direction, the scholar's background pulled more strongly in another. What was less generally accepted, but to me equally true, was that, even in explaining the vogue of an apparently fruitful theory, we still needed to bring in the background factor; for without this factor working in such a way as to reinforce the pull of the phenomena, the theory would not have come to accord with the latter in the way it did.

Now in the case of enquiries into African religion, it was evident that the socio-cultural and personal background of *all* of us engaged in them had a strong Western component. For not only had people born and brought up as Westerners predominated until recently in this field. The African scholars now coming to the fore in the field were also the products of an Afro-Western elite culture in which the Western component loomed large. (Even where, as they frequently did, they reacted with deep resentment against the more ethnocentric effusions of Western theorists, it was still in a sense the West that was calling their tune.) Hence, if we were fully to understand *both* the mistakes *and* the insights of researchers in this field, whether they were Westerners or Africans, we had to delve deeply into the Western element in their background. This, then, is a further reason why several of the essays in this volume move to and fro between African thought and its Western counterpart.

Here I rest my case, hoping I have persuaded the reader that the conjunction between 'Africa' and 'the West' in the title of this book not only provides an accurate indication of the content of the essays included in it, but also reflects a coherent and broadly worthwhile set of intellectual preoccupations.

II

Let me turn next to the arrangement and content of the individual essays included in this volume.

Under the first sectional heading, *Beginnings*, I have put a single early paper: 'A Definition of Religion, and Its Uses'.⁵ In retrospect, I see this as a rather loosely-organized and meandering piece. Nonetheless, there are a number of reasons for including it.

First of all, it records my initial struggle to find a theoretical framework adequate to my fieldwork materials, and so may throw some light on my subsequent theoretical endeavours.

Secondly, it proposes a definition of religion which has been implicit in my subsequent work: a definition which, following Tylor's, emphasizes belief in extra-human personal beings and action in relation to such beings.

Thirdly, it contains a number of insights which I see as flowing from this definition, some of which I discuss at greater length in later essays and in the postscript. Here, I should like to pick out one such insight for special mention: that regarding the two major aspects of religious life, which I refer to in this paper as 'manipulation' and 'communion'. By 'manipulation', I refer to that aspect of a social relationship in which one partner treats the other as a means to achieving an ulterior end. By 'communion', I refer to that aspect in which one partner treats the other as an end in himself or herself. I show that, in religious as in purely human relationships, there is a wide range of variation between these two poles, with more or less pure 'manipulation' at one extreme, more or less pure 'communion' at the other, and a great many combinations lying between them. I also conduct a brief but wide-ranging exploration of the causes of such variation.

The distinction between 'manipulation' and 'communion' foreshadows my later (and I think more satisfactory) distinction between 'explanation/prediction/control' and 'communion'. In this later distinction, 'explanation/prediction/control' refers to religion as a system of theory and associated practice directed to the comprehension and practical control of events in the everyday space-time world, whilst 'communion' refers to it as a set of personal relationships with the being or beings postulated by the theory – relationships which are entered into by the human partners as ends in themselves.

Despite all the other schemes for the division of religious life into aspects which have been proposed in recent years, I continue to see this division as the most fundamental. In several of the later essays in this volume, indeed, I touch on its usefulness in elucidating some of the salient differences between African and Western religious life, and in helping us to understand modern developments in Western religious life. However, although my

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overall interpretative framework has continued to stress this two-aspect character of religious life, much of my actual work subsequent to this early paper has stressed the ‘explanation/prediction/control’ aspect to the relative neglect of the ‘communion’ aspect. This has been due, not to a change of mind about the importance of the latter, but rather to the fact that, from the point of view of theory development, I have seen my way ahead more clearly with respect to the former. Nonetheless, this neglect has given a certain lopsidedness to my interpretative efforts. To use recent terminology, it has led to an emphasis on the ‘cold’ side of religion at the expense of the ‘hot’.

I shall return to this important topic in the postscript. Meanwhile, the fairly extended treatment of the ‘communion’ aspect in this early piece provides a reminder that, even in my notoriously Intellectualist interpretative framework, the ‘cold’ side of religion is not the only one to receive recognition.

Under the next heading, *Mainly Critical*, I have put five papers. As the heading suggests, these are devoted above all to criticism of the more fashionable interpretative frameworks associated in recent times with the study of African religions, and indeed of religions generally. These pieces, I hope, will soften up the reader and prepare him to look favourably on my own framework, which gets its full presentation in the following section.

Here, I single out for treatment two principal frameworks, which I call respectively the ‘Symbolist’ and the ‘Theological’. (In the essays, I refer to adherents of the ‘Theological’ framework as ‘The Devout Opposition’. But I now think it makes for greater clarity to refer to the framework as ‘Theological’ and to its adherents as ‘the Theologians’.)

The Symbolist approach divides human thought and discourse into two great categories: the expressive, which involves the production of symbolic imagery as an end in itself; and the instrumental, which involves the use of literal, discursive thought and language to achieve the ulterior end of practical control of the world. Into the first category fall art, magic and religion; whilst into the second fall common-sense, technological and scientific thinking. Although both expressive and instrumental categories are within the compass of all human minds and are to be found in all human cultures, the expressive is said to predominate over the instrumental in African and other non-Western cultures, and the instrumental to predominate over the expressive in the modern West. In practice, so far as the interpretation of African magical and religious thought is concerned, what this implies is a strategy in which the scholar assimilates magic and religion to art, and in which he tries his best to translate African and/or other religious discourse into terms of Western aesthetic discourse.⁶

Three papers in this section exemplify my critique of the Symbolists. These are: ‘Neo-Tylorianism: sound sense or sinister prejudice?’, ‘Lévy-

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Bruhl, Durkheim and the Scientific Revolution', and 'Back to Frazer?'.⁷ In all three papers, I point out the basic inadequacy of the Symbolist approach to African magical and religious discourse, and indeed to magical and religious discourse generally.

One major objection to the Symbolist approach arises from its assertion that, when African or other religious thinkers talk about the presence and activity of the gods, they intend their statements, not literally, but rather as figurative representations of purely earthly realities. Like any assertion that things are not what they seem, this Symbolist pronouncement would require strong supporting evidence to carry conviction. Its producers, however, fail dismally to furnish us with any such evidence. In the absence of the latter, we are bound to take African and other religious assertions as literally intended.

A second and related objection is that Symbolists, by insisting that the real, underlying intention in these areas of discourse is the production of symbolic imagery as an end in itself, dismiss both the explanation/prediction/control and the communion aspects of religion as matters of superficial and deceptive appearance. Here, they would seem to be guilty of flouting the evidence on a grand scale.

In these papers, I contend that an interpretative approach so far removed from the realities of magical and religious thought can be understood only in terms of the Western educational and ideological background of the scholars concerned. In this regard, I make two suggestions.

The first suggestion is that the whole approach is conditioned by an unbalanced endowment of Western translational resources: an endowment strongly loaded in favour of aesthetic discourse and weak in respect of both religious and scientific discourse. Those concerned have to make do with the translational resources they have got; and the latter are simply inappropriate to the task on hand.

The second suggestion is that the approach is conditioned by an ideology in which liberal scrupulousness is combined with romanticism. Most Symbolists accept that non-Western world-views, *if* considered as systems for explanation, prediction and control, and *if* measured as such against the yardstick of modern Western science, emerge as markedly inferior to the latter. By denying that explanation, prediction and control are the *real* aims of non-Western religious discourse, Symbolists are able to avoid imputations of inferiority to this discourse, and so to satisfy their liberal scruples. Again, by imputing to such discourse concerns quite other than those of the sciences, they are able to see it as at least a partial fulfilment of the romantic dream of a world from which the heartless concerns of these latter are largely absent.

Let us turn now from the Symbolist to the Theological framework. Here,

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we have an approach which is not only very different from that of the Symbolists, but is also frankly opposed to it. Thus to the Theologians, the Symbolist assertion that talk about the gods or about God is just figurative talk about earthly things is anathema.

The essence of the Theological approach is two-fold. First, it insists that modern Western religious discourse provides the sole legitimate 'world-language' translation instrument for other systems of religious discourse. In its portrayals of these other systems, it thereby gives universal prominence to the idea of God and to the communion aspect of religious life. Secondly, it insists that the ultimate explanation of all religious thought and action is the self-revelation of a Judaeo-Christian type God to all men at all times and places.

So far as the study of African religions is concerned, the Theological approach represents, in a sense, an alternative orthodoxy to that of the Symbolists. Amongst social anthropologists, it is true, exponents of this approach have tended to be in a minority (though some eminent Africanists such as Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner have been numbered amongst them). In Departments of Comparative Religion and Religious Studies, however, they have tended to be in a majority. On the African continent, where most studies of African religious life are carried out nowadays by Religious Studies personnel rather than by social anthropologists, sociologists or historians, exponents of the Theological approach have come to enjoy a virtual monopoly of interpretation.⁸

In this section, my critique of the Theological theorists is represented by two essays: 'Professor Winch on safari', in which I discuss a philosopher's intervention that has found favour with some members of this school; and 'Judaeo-Christian spectacles: boon or bane to the study of African religions?', in which I take on the school more directly and as a whole.⁹

In these essays, I make two main critical points.

My first point is that the Theological approach leads to distortion at the level of translational understanding. Thus, by stressing the centrality in all religions of a single creator/sustainer of the universe who is male in sex and wholly good in moral terms, it travesties several at least of the religious systems of Africa and many in the world at large. Again, by stressing the communion aspect of religious life and underplaying the explanation/prediction/control aspect, it travesties virtually every one of the religious systems of Africa and most of those in the world at large.

My second point is that the Theological theorists' ultimate explanation of the flourishing of religious thought and discourse, in terms of the universal self-revelation of a Judaeo-Christian type God, is, when judged in terms of its observational consequences, simply worthless. For what we see in the world's religions is not just a great diversity of ideas about a supreme being,

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but the absence in many religions of the idea of such a being, and even the absence in some milieux of any idea of spiritual beings of any kind. As far as doing justice to the phenomena goes, then, the Theological theorists' explanation is a non-starter.

As with the Symbolists, so with the Theological theorists I have tried to supply not just a critique but also a diagnosis. Once again, I suggest that the failure of these theorists stems from a combination of inappropriate Western translation resources and obfuscating Western ideology.

With regard to translation resources, the basic trouble with the Theologians seems to be the same as that with the Symbolists. They start with an unbalanced endowment, and then go on to make their desperate best of it. Thus where the Symbolists are strong on aesthetic discourse but weak on religious and scientific discourse, the Theologians are strong on the religious but weak on the scientific and the aesthetic. So instead of pushing the claims of aesthetic discourse and neglecting those of religious and scientific discourse they push the claims of the religious and neglect those of the scientific and the aesthetic.

Unfortunately for the Theologians, modern Western religious discourse is virtually unique in confining itself to the communion aspect of religious life, whilst leaving the explanation/prediction/control aspect to the sciences. Even in the earlier West, religious discourse dealt with both aspects. In virtually all other religious traditions, moreover, such discourse not only always has dealt with both aspects, but continues to do so. It follows that, *used by itself*, modern Western religious discourse is not an adequate instrument for the translation, either of earlier Western religious discourse, or of non-Western religious discourse generally. Rather, in order that justice be done to the explanation/prediction/control aspect dealt with by these other systems, its resources need to be complemented by those of the theoretical discourse of the sciences. Here, I am calling for the re-amalgamation, for the purposes of translation, of areas of discourse which have become separated during the course of Western history. This operation, of course, is going to be an extremely tricky one; and I for one cannot be sure of mastering it. But the Theologians, in so far as they seldom command the resources of scientific discourse, can scarcely even hope to begin.

With regard to ideology, I suggest that the Theologians suffer from a conflict between the liberal, anti-racist egalitarianism which they share with the Symbolists, and the feeling they have as Christians that people who adhere to a religion whose cosmology is remote from that of Christianity are somehow inferior and indeed damned. They try to resolve this conflict by a 'Christianizing' of other religions, hoping thereby to remove the need to pass invidious judgements on their adherents. This ideological stratagem

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combines with their translational bias to carry them far away from the realities of religious life outside the modern West.

Despite their obvious differences, Symbolist and Theological frameworks nonetheless share some quite important features. Notable among these are: a view of the relation between the religious and the scientific which stresses a radical contrast between the guiding intentions of these two areas of thought and discourse; and an underlying desire to rescue religion, religious people and religious cultures from the disrepute into which they were cast by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theorists. This is why, in recent lectures on Theories of Religion, I have labelled adherents of both frameworks 'Rehabilitators', and their immediate predecessors 'Denigrators'.

A further feature common to both Symbolists and Theologians is a high degree of complacent self-congratulation over the advances they have allegedly made on the thought of their predecessors. In fact, however, as I argue most explicitly and circumstantially in 'Back to Frazer?', this assumption of theoretical progress is quite unjustified. The sad truth is that, in turning from Denigrators to Rehabilitators, we see no real progress, but only the replacement of one set of errors by another. In the light of what I have said in this section, there is nothing mysterious about this depressing situation. It is simply that during the last hundred or so years, changes of theory in this area have been responses, not primarily to the massive influx of new and richer cross-cultural data which has been one of the most exciting features of the period, but rather to changes in the socio-cultural backgrounds and personal preoccupations of the theorists.

Should we then despair of theory in our field? I think not. First, since theory of one kind or another guides even those of our efforts which appear most purely descriptive and monographic, we can scarcely do without it. Secondly, once we realise that the fashionable scoffing at the ideal of objectivity in our field is little more than an excuse for the continuation of some of the subtler forms of ethnocentric indulgence to which I have been pointing, we shall feel free to try and clarify this vital ideal and make the clarified version into a beacon guiding our work. Thirdly, once we have realised the extent to which the influence of our social settings and personal preoccupations continues to detract from objectivity in this field, we can start to watch out for this influence and fight its effects on our own theoretical work.

It is with these considerations very much in mind that I have struggled to elaborate my own theoretical framework, and have offered it as an improvement on both the Symbolist and the Theological frameworks.

Under the third heading, *Mainly Constructive*, I have put three essays whose principal concern, despite some critical side-swipes at rival frameworks, is to expound my own approach. These essays are: 'African traditional thought