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978-0-521-56234-8 - Religion in Context: Cults and Charisma

I. M. Lewis

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Religious power assumes many strikingly different forms, which are often regarded both by believers and by students of religion as unique, unrelated, and even mutually exclusive. In this book, however, I. M. Lewis adopts a holistic approach and argues that to understand the nature of spiritual power we need to appreciate how these apparently contradictory mystical manifestations are in fact part of a single complex of mutually defining and sustaining elements. Stressing the importance of rigorous social contextualization, he analyzes such seemingly disparate phenomena as spirit-possession, witchcraft, cannibalism, and shamanism, which are usually attributed to separate cults and even cultures, revealing the interconnections both between them and with the world religions, such as Islam and Christianity. This expanded and revised edition includes two new chapters, taking spider symbolism in the Italian tarantist spirit cult as a point of departure for a radical critique of Mary Douglas's theory of dangerous anomalies; and showing how the exorcism of spirits in Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam serves to entrench the power of men over women.

Besides presenting a critique of the treatment of religious phenomena as reified, Professor Lewis demonstrates – in an intriguing deconstruction of the classic anthropological fieldwork situation that he sees as itself a kind of shamanic initiation – the complexity of the problem of understanding other peoples' beliefs, and the way in which these beliefs often inadvertently become part of anthropological theory. He emphasizes the continuing strength in social and cultural anthropology of a comparative approach that constantly seeks to force anthropological "theory" into a dialogue with ethnographic particulars, thereby encouraging the distillation of empirically more satisfactory theory.

This illumination of critical aspects of religious power, a demonstration of the value of a comparative approach in the formulation of anthropological theory, will interest scholars and students of social and cultural anthropology and religious studies, as well as other readers concerned with the nature of religion in the modern world.

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I. M. LEWIS

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Preface

The beliefs and behavior conventionally distinguished as “witchcraft,” “spirit-possession,” “cannibalism,” and “shamanism” seem at first sight to have little in common. Anthropologists and other students of comparative religion regularly treat these phenomena as totally unrelated and even mutually exclusive, objectified “things” characteristic of different cults and of distinctive types (and stages) of culture and society. This book takes a different view. It argues that, on the contrary, these are actually closely related expressions of mystical power, or “charisma.” In fact, as we shall see when we examine them closely, each illuminates the others, and the integrative, comparative approach advocated here enables us to understand how the conquest and transformation of malign forces (“negative charisma”) empowers the leaders of charismatic cults, whose status is always potentially ambiguous. Especially where they occupy a marginal position in relation to a world religion, such cults of affliction are frequently stigmatized in their wider social context as “superstitious survivals.” Our analysis indicates that, on the contrary, such cults are often recent developments which, with the attribution of the unorthodox to the past, actually play a crucial role in the definition of orthodox belief itself.

In endeavoring to elucidate these contrasting configurations of mystical power by emphasizing their underlying interconnections rather than their differences, I also seek to display the continuing value in social (and cultural) anthropology of a comparative analysis – one that continually seeks to force anthropological “theory” into a dialogue with

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ethnographic “facts,” encouraging the distillation of empirically more satisfactory theory. This empiricist dialogue is indeed complex, as I emphasize in the opening chapter, which reflects upon anthropological fieldwork itself as a form of shamanistic initiation. Questioning the glib anthropological construction of culturally representative “cosmologies,” Chapter 1 explores the origins of “anthropological” theories of witchcraft and their relation to native beliefs and disbeliefs. The standard psycho-dynamic, social-tension theory of witchcraft as an expression of jealousy and spite is, as we see borrowed directly from the native sources to which it is applied by anthropologists. This in turn offers an illuminating epidemiological perspective for understanding the incidence of those afflictions affecting particularly women, which are interpreted in terms of spirit-possession and which involve spirits that indirectly exert pressure on the opposite sex. Hence the anthropological theory of witchcraft, derived from ethnographic sources, also helps us to understand and analyze the ethnography of spirit-possession.

In the same comparativist vein, Chapter 2 explores another aspect of spirit possession – its animal symbolism in the case of the Italian tarantist cult of the tarantula spider-spirit which, it is argued, provides a novel point of departure for a critique of Mary Douglas’s classic theory of animal “anomalies.” These, as we shall see, turn out to be very ambiguously grounded in the “ethnographic facts” of the Lele people of the Congo, whose animal categories are the source of Douglas’s theory which centers on the “anomalous” nature of the scaly ant-eater, or pangolin. The Lele environment, in fact, includes several distinct types of pangolin which evoke different Lele responses in ways that cast serious doubt on the validity of Douglas’s interpretation. The situation becomes even more complex when we take account of the variability in the treatment by neighboring ethnic groups of the different pangolins of the Congo region.

This problem, which Douglas’s theory does not address, suggests new hypotheses which look to cosmological differences to explain the variable treatment of pangolin species as

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potential spirit animals. More generally, as our comparison of spider and pangolin symbolism is intended to highlight, where two or more related natural species are subject to differential religious treatment, a satisfactory interpretation should explain why one is selected for preferential attention. The pangolin case, however, cannot really be fully elucidated on the basis of the existing ethnographic evidence. We need new comparative research on the symbolic treatment of the pangolin as a sacred or spirit animal.

In Chapter 3 we explore the epidemiology of spirit possession, tracing the implications of the vulnerability which we find women display to spirit attack. Here women are in effect marginalized by men and develop cults which, in relation to male religion, are also marginal and typically involve “peripheral” spirits that are foreign to local mainstream culture. Of course, this is not necessarily how women themselves see their situation, nor is it in any sense an “objective” assessment of the actual importance of women in a given society. I emphasize this because, although it seems fairly obvious, my argument has often been misunderstood here.

Since possession of this kind is something for which, in the societies where it occurs, women can hardly be blamed, there are here intriguing analogies to that recalcitrant case in witchcraft studies – the self-confessing, involuntary witch. Such “introvert” self-accusing witches, who often turn out to be women desperately seeking help, like their spirit-possessed counterparts, are in effect mystically licensed to exert pressure on their immediate circle. Thus, through applying the theory of witchcraft analysis to spirit-possession, we reap the additional reward of gaining new insights into the dynamics of witchcraft itself.

This prompts the general reconsideration we embark upon in Chapter 4 of types of witchcraft (and sorcery) as modes of mystical attack, suggesting that, in their effects, spirit-possession and “introspective” witchcraft are milder forms of mystical aggression, employed against superiors, than are “extrovert” accusations against inferiors. A limiting factor

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here, apparently, is that the charismatic leaders of possession cults risk being charged with witchcraft and denounced as witches.

This anthropological understanding of the dynamics of witchcraft and spirit-possession is informed by the generally disbelieving stance of the anthropologist. This has had, as we see in Chapter 5, a curious effect on anthropological studies of cannibalism, where reports of cannibalism in witchcraft contexts have been dismissed as fantasy while often being uncritically accepted in non-witchcraft contexts! Here the cannibalistic reputation acquired by Europeans in colonial Africa after their suppression of witchcraft (and, hence, inadvertent protection of witches) should give us pause. A more enlightening approach to the meaning of cannibalism as ideology or practice acknowledges this relationship with witchcraft and takes the analysis of mystical power one stage farther, stressing its connection with various modes of sexual aggression.

Although, as I emphasize, it is never unambiguously so, in all these contexts mystical power is seen primarily as a negative force. The dramatic conquest of this malign power is, as Chapter 6 insists, the archetypal foundation for the assumption of the charismatic role par excellence – that of the shaman. This is the most positive meaning placed upon affliction as the basis for initiation into charismatic cults. As soon as the treatment takes the form of domestication rather than exorcism, it becomes a charismatic initiation rite of the type central to shamanism. As I argue, misleading reifications that treat “positive” and “negative” mystical experience separately have prevented anthropologists and others from appreciating the ubiquitous character of shamanistic initiation and its position in the “career structure” of spirit-possession cults. Ethnographic data again force us to revise anthropological theory.

Naturally, the domestication (adorcism) of spirits in the course of the development of the shamanic career, or more temporarily as a treatment for a specific affliction, is not the only option. Exorcism, which is the principal other possible

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response has, Chapter 7 argues, its own modalities, linking it with gender and male power. Theoretically, accommodation (adorcism) and exorcism would seem equally appropriate responses to sickness and affliction attributed to spirit possession. But, when we look carefully at how each of these alternative treatments is actually mobilized in male-dominated Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist cultures, we find that exorcism is the treatment preferred by men in contrast to women's preference for adorcism. Exorcism thus, generally, seems to serve the interests of male hierarchy – but, as we shall see, does not always engender a contrasting reaction in the form of a women's cult, based on adorcism. In fact, exorcism turns out in practise to be a more complex and problematic process than at first appears. It proves difficult to be definitively rid of troublesome spirits, or for the exorcist to avoid what amounts to contamination by the expelled spirits.

As well as providing a better understanding of the internal dynamics of charismatic cults, this cumulative comparative analysis also highlights the external role of marginal cults in the broader definition of ideological boundaries. My final chapter shows (with reference to African Islam) how these marginal, local cults are classified officially (against the historical evidence) as “survivals” and so contribute to the dynamic process of adjustment by which universal world religions define and redefine metropolitan orthodoxy by contrasting it to “primitive superstition.” The price centrality pays to marginality for providing this service is, in effect, the ambiguous power it cedes to the latter. This dialectical context forces us to scrutinize carefully the concept of “survival” and prompts at the same time a better understanding of the nature and needs of orthodoxy. It also takes our analysis of the precipitating circumstances of women's peripheral spirit-possession a stage further, showing how the extent of the involvement of wives in these cults may become an index of *embourgeoisement* and male respectability and so become linked to the changing status of women. And here, for the moment at any rate, I rest my case. At least I hope to have

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demonstrated the advantages of this general comparative approach to configurations of mystical energy that are usually reified and treated as though they had no connection with one another – and so are, as I argue, gravely misunderstood.

This volume, as I must remind the reader in conclusion, is also intended as a demonstration of the enduring validity in social anthropology (here in the anthropological study of religion), of an empiricist methodology which, in the elucidation of social forces and formations, commits data and theory to an on-going, creative dialogue. Needless to say, this approach rejects the self-indulgent and ultimately stultifying vogue of 1970s and 1980s anthropology for “post-modernist,” “reflective,” and “literary” (a term used rather optimistically!) modes of discourse, where, since everything in ethnographic rendering is deemed to be equally valid, literally anything goes.

Chapters 1 and 3, based on formal public lectures, have been left essentially in the form in which they were originally delivered, issues raised by Chapter 3 and subsequent developments being elaborated in the following chapters. In revising this latter material particularly, I have benefited from discussions with a wide range of colleagues and friends at the universities of Budapest, Helsinki, Illinois, Indiana, Kyoto, Naples, Osaka, Pennsylvania, Rome, Urbino, and Washington (to mention only the more distant). As usual, I am especially grateful to Joan Wells, Caroline Simpson, and Carol Evans for typing (and retyping) so much of this book. Christina Toren’s help in systematizing and checking the notes and bibliography is also warmly appreciated. I wish, finally, to thank Roger Smedley for revising and improving the index.

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