

Religious Innovation in Modern African Society:

Introduction

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Mainly three considerations have prompted our tentative re-examination, in the present special issue of *African Perspectives*, of current interpretations of religious innovation in modern African society.

First, since the classical explorations initiated by pioneers like Sundkler and Balandier, the field of study has reached a certain maturity over the past two decades. The considerable number of first-rate monographic studies and the ever-continuing attempts at typological improvement bear witness to this.

Secondly, in so far as classical interpretations of religious innovation in Africa have emphasized links with the colonial situation and with emergent African nationalism, the attainment of territorial independence in most parts of Africa - crowning achievement of local nationalisms - has offered the opportunity to subject these interpretations to fairly strict empirical tests. If the colonial situation and emergent nationalism did in fact represent the causal nexus classical analyses have suggested, then, theoretically at least, the advent of Independence under nationalist secular leadership should have dramatically effected the process of religious innovation: either taking away its allegedly driving force, or forcing it to a dramatic change of course. As other authors have observed (e.g. Barrett 1968: 246f), the empirical data do not bear out this theoretical prediction.

Thirdly, the last decade or so has seen tremendous advances in the historical study of African religion, particularly its structure and dynamics in the pre-colonial period¹). While in this field it is still far too early for synthesis and definitive results, this development means at any rate the end of the monolithic and timeless concept of 'traditional African religion' - hitherto the base-line against which latterday religious movements used to be analysed. Thus we have to interpret religious innovation in Africa against a radically redefined African religious past.

The seven studies brought together in the present volume tie in with these general developments, although, understandably, none deals with all, and none pursues the consequences of either of these developments to their full extent.

Both in the selection of key problems and in the theoretical approach brought to bear upon the empirical material, these studies display considerable variety. Rather than apologizing for this we feel that it is a fair representation of the lack of consensus and the state of flux currently dominating this field of enquiry. As almost anywhere in modern African studies, there is disagreement as to what constitutes important analytical problems. There is a tantalizing lack of a common idiom. The authors represent such different academic disciplines as em-

¹) E.g. Ranger and Kimambo 1972; Schoffeleers 1977; the journal *African Religious Research* (1971-1975) covered a significant selection of these developments.

pirical sociology, history and missiology. They each derive their experience with African religious innovation mainly from one culture province within the continent. They represent, finally, different scholarly traditions, where the difference in orientation and indeed in conceptualisation between the French and the Anglo-Saxon tradition is particularly conspicuous.

Yet, what unites the seven authors is that all, in their own way, are engaged in an exercise of revaluation. And even if this does not yet lead to firm new conclusions, the direction suggested in their revaluations is, as we shall presently demonstrate, promising enough.

Within the field of religious innovation in modern African society, Independent Churches have stimulated most research and debate. In fact, so much has this topic dominated the field, that we only gradually begin to perceive the wealth of prophetic, eschatological and healing innovatory movements that have *not* been inspired, either directly or indirectly, by Christianity - but which all the same try to come to terms with rather similar problems as those in evidence in the Independent Churches. In any case, Southern Africa has from the outset set the trend in the study of Independency, and in her review article Thérèse Gerold-Scheepers discusses new research and theoretical developments in the South-African field.

The papers by Harold W. Turner and Martinus Daneel also belong to the research tradition of Independency. Both authors have gained international renown by their work in this field. Both are concerned with the critical assessment of older typologies and the evolution of new concepts to fit their data more closely. Both work in a comparative fashion, examining a fair number of innovatory religious forms.

Of the two, Turner's article is the more comprehensive and ambitious. His critical discussion of earlier attempts to define the field in such terms as messianism, protest movements, millenarism, crisis cults etc., is extremely useful. Yet the alternative approaches Turner's article offers in abundance, suggest that it may yet be too early for the emergence of viable theoretical and conceptual approaches that take into account all three developments mentioned in our opening paragraphs. For does Turner's proposal to define the field by the concept of 'new religious movements' really solve our difficulties? Turner's definition of 'movement' insufficiently acknowledges the fact that precisely the evolution of a specific *organizational structure* constitutes one of the great problems of any religious innovation (cf. Van Binsbergen 1977). However, Turner's subsequent development of a typology on organizational structure redeems him on this point. Moreover, Turner defines 'new' exclusively in the sense of emerging from the confrontation between Western, Christian religious forms with some African 'primal religion' - thus suggesting this 'primal religion' to be a-historic, static, and forming one well-defined, integrated system. The present state of African religious history does not warrant this view. Let us take for example the situation in Central Africa. Recent research had revealed the very dramatic changes religious institutions have undergone in this part of the world over the past few centuries, *prior* to the introduction of Christianity and colonial rule around 1900. Now if for instance the major territorial and chiefly cults encountered by the turn of the century often happened to be innovations still in the process of being accommodated amongst pre-existing religious institutions, the notion of 'the primal religion' loses much of its validity (e.g. Schoffeleers 1977; earlier versions of

most papers included in: Conference 1972). Moreover, it has been argued that such religious innovations as actually occurred around and after 1900 reveal trends which had started centuries before, in response to processes of economic and political change, particularly state formation and long-distance trade. The confrontation with the West, in this view, 'no doubt accelerated innovation and imposed constraints upon the direction of the process, but (...) did not set it into motion, and did (at least in the religious sphere) not constitute anything like the sharp break one has so often taken for granted' (Van Binsbergen 1976).

This criticism points to the need for a further tightening of Turner's definition. However, it does not substantially affect his stimulating approach, and might easily be accommodated therein. Stimulating are also his proposals for two new typologies: one for the religious *content* of the 'new religious movements', another for their organizational structure.

Daneel's struggle with similar typological problems is primarily inspired by theological concern. This reflects the situation in which his contribution has been written. After his fieldwork and impressive sociological and historical writings on the Zimbabwean Independent Churches, he has been engaged since 1971 in the theological counselling of these churches. But his argument is by no means only of interest to theologians. His subtle discussion of Independent Church leaders in a setting where the government, the nationalist movement, and the chiefs are the main other protagonists, is vivid and illuminating. While sociological interpretation is not Daneel's main concern, the wealth of data he offers nicely fits into the Weberian perspective that Peel (1973) has recently advocated as the most promising approach to the study of religious innovation in Africa. One sees chiefs make full use of the religiously legitimating potential that the Independent Churches offer them. Similarly, Daneel's description of succession crises, and of the substantial social activities the independent Churches evolve (communities, schools, interlocal networks for the assistance of pilgrims, 'master farming' etc), can be meaningfully interpreted in the light of Weber's discussion of the major problems which the routinization of charisma poses: the transmission of the initial charismatic leadership to duly legitimated office-bearers after the founder's death, and the accommodation to the everyday economic conditions of the wider society (Weber 1964 : 363f).

Daneel's argument opens up a theme which, in various versions, also runs through the contributions by Robert Buijtenhuijs, Christian Coulon, and Wim van Binsbergen, and which may well constitute the main sign of new theoretical advances that the present symposium has to offer. For Daneel, the Independent Churches are not primarily defined by any antagonism, neither towards Whites, colonization, government, mission churches, governmental educational institutions, nor towards nationalism. Admittedly they may have found occasion to express antagonism towards any of these in one stage of their development or another. But, the main impetus behind the Independent Churches seems to be the *attempt to reconstruct a disrupted social order*. Hence the 'need to control the process of acculturation' (p. 88). Hence the attempt to secure a measure of social power, not as an aim in itself, but because power is required for this reconstruction attempt to succeed. Struggles tend to arise mainly when in the pursuit of this reconstruction the Independent Churches infringe on whatever the other significant loci of power in the society have defined as their particular prerogative: e.g. clashes with government over schools alongside clashes with anti-government natio-

nalists over both popular support and the definition of the nature of the new social order that is to emerge in the end.²⁾

Having thus defined the shared trend towards the interpretation of modern religious innovation as local attempts to reconstruct a disrupted social order, we can pass briefly over the specific arguments of Buijtenhuijs, Coulon and Van Binsbergen. In an assessment primarily of the French literature on the subject, Buijtenhuijs sets his version of this emergent approach against Balandier's contention that 'although they are outwardly religious these movement rapidly develop a political aspect; they are at the origin of nationalisms which are still unsophisticated but unequivocal in their expression' (Balandier 1965 : 443). Coulon aptly demonstrates that the emerging trend, illuminating as it may be for the study of that part of Africa that has become a diffusion area of Christianity, is equally applicable to religious innovation within Senegalese Islam in the late 19th and early 20th century A.C. In Coulon's approach, too, the potential of a Weberian interpretation is stressed. Similarly, Van Binsbergen offers a new interpretation of the Zambian Lumpa rising: however, his emphasis on class struggle and infra-/superstructural dialectics renders his version of the reconstruction-of-order thesis rather different from Buijtenhuijs' or Coulon's.

Kapteijns' contribution entirely, and purposely, underplays the non-religious element in Mahdism in 19th century Sudan. She convincingly states the case for the predominance of religious elements in the Mahdi's self-conception, and shows how the Mahdi in all details fits into the Islam of his time; but her argument does not answer the question of what made the Mahdi appear at precisely that point in history.

Our reconstruction-of-order thesis might be capable of providing an answer on this point. But here, as in all the other contributions in which this tentative view is pursued, Turner's thoughtful criticism of the crisis interpretation of religious innovation is applicable. As he points out, problems and tensions have marked Black Africa through the last seventy or more years (p. 17); how is one to isolate, in this historical record, the conglomeration of events and circumstances that, more than others, triggered specific religious innovations? One needs a fairly specific theory of the social order, its disruption, and the stages of its active reconstruction by members of the society, before the emergent approach advocated here can become truly meaningful. However, for such a theory one need not confine oneself to the African material. Excellent recent theoretical studies such as Burridge's *New Heaven New Earth* (1971) and Baechler's *Les Phénomènes révolutionnaires* (1970) do provide models whose applicability, however, we cannot even begin to assess within the scope of this introduction.

Meanwhile, the convergence in basic interpretation between most contributions offered here, should not be mistaken for a proof of their validity. These contributions are highly exploratory. Although some display a Weberian inspiration, they all lack a satisfactorily integrated theory. What is now needed most is that these incipient insights be attached to comprehensive sociological and political theory, that is, one capable of explaining not just religious innovation but a much wider range of related social phenomena in modern African society.

²⁾ Throughout, parallels between the Zimbabwean situation and the Zambian one as described in Van Binsbergen's paper are striking and may eventually lead to similar conflict in the former case.

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