VERNACULAR CHRISTIANITY: Essays in the Social Anthropology of Religion

Edited by Wendy James and Douglas H. Johnson

This book explores the ways in which the Christian faith has been lived within a variety of geographical and historical contexts of language, culture and local political experience. A broad comparative sweep, on the basis of a series of case-studies, between the older vernacular style of the Mediterranean world and the newer forms produced by missionary activity in the modern Third World. Taking influence from Durkheim, Lieven's pioneering anthropological studies of religion, the contributions in this book express the practice of Christianity rather than the various forms of Christian doctrine. The book is divided into five sections: The first part deals with Christianity interpreted from Mediterranean Christianity as experienced by contacts with European colonialist, modern Brazil, and Resistance Spain and Italy. The second part considers the experiential worlds of Christianity brought about by European imperialism, imperial expansion, and the second-century missionary activity. The third section explores the impact of modern Western Christianity on non-Western cultures unexplored territories. Their final section, focusing on African crises in Ghana, Nigeria, the Sudan and Zimbabwe, once the way in which western Christian belief has been absorbed by indigenous order simulations and assimilated into a variety of formal and vernacular religious experience and expression.

VERNACULAR CHRISTIANITY

Essays in the Social Anthropology of Religion
Presented to Godfrey Lienhardt

Edited by
WENDY JAMES AND DOUGLAS H. JOHNSON

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Vernacular Christianity: Essays in the Social Anthropology of Religion
Presented to GEOFFREY LIEBMAN

...I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold...having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of ointment, which are the prayers of saints. And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof; for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.

The Revelation of St. John the Divine 4:4: 5:8–10

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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." 1

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 1955 essay, 2 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 practise it.3

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'.4 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.

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.5 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.6

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.7 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 religion; 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 1962) that several of the essays in this volume take their particular lead.8 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 mission'. 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

2. Ibid., p. 325.
5. Ibid., p. 326.
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 vasty 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, province 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 acknowledgment 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.

**Oxford**

**November 1987**

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The frontispiece of Godfrey Lienhardt appears by courtesy of Wobson College, Oxford, where Godfrey is currently a Professorial Fellow and was Vice-Principal 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 Ssempeko, 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 Wobson College.

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations xiii

WENDY JAMES and DOUGLAS H. JOHNSON
Introductory Essay: On ‘Native’ Christianity 1

Part I: Old Vernacular Styles of the Christian World

ROGER JEST
Anti-clericalism and National Identity: Attitudes towards the Orthodox Church in Greece 15

AHMED AL-SHAIH
Northern Sudanese Perceptions of the Nubian Christian Legacy 31

JOHN RYKE
Miracles of the People: Attitudes to Catholicism in an Afro-Brazilian Religious Centre in Salvador da Bahia 40

CARMelo Lenz-Tolbana
The Baster: Feminine Responses to Christianity in Sixteenth-century Castile 51

JAYNE ANDERSON
The Head-hunter and Head-huntress in Italian Religious Portraiture 60

Part II: Nineteenth-century Redefinitions

TALAL ASAD
Towards a Genealogy of the Concept of Ritual 73

BRIAN STREET
Christian Representations of the Death of Captain Cook 88

Part III: New Vernaculars on the Christian Frontier

EVA GILLIES
The Coming of Christianity to a Nigerian Middle Belt Community 105
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Frontispiece
Godfrey Liebhardt (Wolfson College, Oxford)

Between pages 28 and 29
The Spartohori village priest (photo: Roger Just)
Settling accounts (photo: Roger Just)

Page 96
The Church of the Granite Columns (eighth century) at Old Dongola
(photo: D. A. Wealby)

Between pages 64 and 65
Giorgione's Self-Portrait as David with the Decapitated Head of Holofernes, engrav- ing by Wenceslaus Hollar
Giorgione’s Self-Portrait as David with the Head of Goliath, Accompanied by Saul and Jonathan, sketch from the inventory of Andrea Vescin-vic’s collection, Venice (1627), (British Library, London, Sloane MSS 4004)
Salamo and St John the Baptist, by Titian (Galleria Doria Pamphilii, Rome)
Judith and the Head of Holofernes, engraving by Vorsterman after Giorgione, from David Teniers’s Theatrum Pictorium (1638), (Ashmolean Library, Oxford)
Judith and the Head of Holofernes, by Vincenzo Catena (Pirotearia Quirzi Stampa- pitia, Venice)
Judith and Holofernes, by Giorgione (Hermitage Museum, Leningrad)
Portrait of Melchiorre Zoppio, engraving after Albani (Biblioteca Comunale dell'Archiginnasio, Bologna)
Portrait of Olimpia Lona as ‘Judith’ and Melchiorre Zoppio as ‘Holofernes’, by Agostano Carracci (Mathiesen Fine Art Ltd., London)
Judith with the Head of Holofernes, by Cristofano Allori (Hampstt Court Palace, reproduced by gracious permission of Her Majesty the Queen)

Page 93
The Apotheosis of Captain Cook, by Woolverton (n.d.), (Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand)

Page 144
Wak tell: church with some of its newly Christian congregation in May 1983, during civil war disturbances this church, with at least fifteen others, was burned down by the Sudanese army in 1987 (photo: Wendy James)
INTRODUCTORY ESSAY:
ON 'NATIVE' CHRISTIANITY

This book opens with a case-study of Greece, the home of the Eastern Orthodox Church. For modern Greeks (as for their forebears) their Church is a part of their native and ancient birthright, given in their national cultural identity, and Westerners are barbarians, or at least late-comers to the periphery of Christianity. The Greek case is a salutary warning-point from which to re-evaluate some of our Western ethnocentrism about Christianity. Greece is one of the oldest Christian countries in the world, part of the ancient heartland of the religion. Christianity has been embedded in the social history of Greece over a far longer period than can be claimed for any of the other case-studies in this collection. The attitudes of modern Greeks, not only towards their Church but towards Christianity, challenge the assumptions many Western European Christians have about the history of the Church and civilization, or the place of faith in Christian identity. It is perhaps upon such discrepancies in social, historical and personal perception, rather than upon formal theological dispute, that great schisms are founded and entrenched. And it is perhaps through the study of the different practices and perceptions of Christians, rather than through the study of their doctrinal differences, that an understanding of Christian diversity can best be achieved. It is here, in the study of the religious life and expression of particular communities at particular times, that anthropology has much to offer Christian studies.

The anthropological study of religion, it has been commonly supposed, deals exclusively with the religion of 'primitive' peoples—the native races' of empires only recently past. Even when anthropologists study Christianity, they are often assumed to concern themselves solely with the Christian sects of the imperial periphery. Certainly anthropology from its beginnings made the
study of the 'primitive' peculiarly its own and contributed to the scholarly constructions of 'primitive' mentality, emotion and religion, firmly confining in the process a proportion of the world's peoples to the lowest rung of an evolutionary ladder. Even when the insights of a more modern social anthropology have been applied to the study of European Christianity, they have tended to focus upon earlier and by implication 'simpler' periods in the development of religion in Europe.¹

The word 'native' has been almost synonymous with 'primitive'. The recent Western image of nativeness, a legacy of nineteenth-century imperial encounters, is defined by contrast to the emissaries of civilization—the explorer, the administrator, the soldier, the missionary. Natives are defined by what they do not have: no clothes, no culture, no history, no rationality, no religion, no word for 'thank you'; nothing, in effect, which marks 'civilization'. This caricature is not just part of popular culture. It still surfaces in surprisingly erudite company. But while anthropology has played its role in entrenching this evolutionary stereotype, it has also, more recently, done much to undermine it, precisely by studying those things which natives are supposed not to have, such as religion.

When social anthropologists now, in Godfrey Lienhardt's words, 'study religious beliefs and practices in relation to particular social situations', they introduce an approach which can be applied to any society, and to any religion. When they suggest that 'religious knowledge and practice are ways in which men apprehend some truths, and adjust themselves to their condition in the light of that apprehension', they open a way to a rather different style of comparative religion than that adopted by the students of sacred texts. And when they observe that people's religious activities have often more in common in practice than have their 'conceptions of gods', they eliminate the evolutionary scale and make the 'native' peoples they study, not our contemporary equivalents, what our contemporaries were.

This is the approach taken by contributors to this volume in the study of 'vernacular Christianity'. A part of the aim is to disengage the notion of Christianity from that of 'the modern West' with which it has too often been unhappily linked, especially in representations of the non-Western world. The modern popular image of relations between the 'developed' and 'undeveloped' countries is still rooted in the nineteenth-century image of the European Christian gentleman bringing his civilization, with his rationality, technical wizardry and fair moral arguments, to the unenlightened subject. In this volume we seek to displace this oppositional image. If the Christian religion is one way in which persons may apprehend some truths, there are

more than a few subtle variations in the apprehension of truth. There are, in fact, different ways in which Christianity itself is apprehended; for outside the authorizing institutions of the Churches and the texit of theological debate there is no Christianity except in the life of vernacular society and culture. We focus on some of the ways in which Christianity has been experienced, apprehended and expressed in 'native' terms; without such a 'native' apprehension, there cannot be a living religion.

By taking the vernacular expression of Christianity (in the cultural as well as the linguistic sense) as our central theme, we are plunged into some of the fundamental contrasts between the absolute claims made for the religion and the complicated history of its practice. There is a tension inherent in Christianity between the universal descent of the Holy Spirit and the cultural expression of Christian values, whether or not enshrined in the institutional forms of a given Church. That tension existed before Christianity began to transform itself from a Jewish sect into a religion of universal claim. Pentecost was perhaps the symbolic (if not the actual) recognition that if the Christian message was to spread, it must be translated into the idiom of other languages. The speaking in tongues may have been the beginning of 'vernacular Christianity' in a literal sense, but the evangelization of foreign communities, the removal of the barrier between Jew and Gentile, brought an immediate clash of cultural values in a more substantive sense. The Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul record this repeated conflict, not only between the early Christian community and the outside world, but within the community itself. How much of the Mosaic Law were the new Christians obliged to keep? How much Jewish culture were Gentile converts expected to adopt?

This conflict of expectations began before the advent of Christianity, with the appearance of scattered communities of 'God-tears', ancient fellow travellers, who were attracted to Jewish worship but stopped short of circumcision and thus were not considered full proselytes. The Apostles not only accepted but welcomed these Gentiles into the Way; Peter by announcing an end to the distinction between 'clean and unclean' (Acts 10), Paul by declaring himself the apostle to the 'uncircumcised' (Gal. 2:7). Both Peter and Paul proclaimed the supremacy of the Holy Spirit over the Law, though not without opposition from within the Christian community (Acts 15), and not without reservations on Peter's part (Gal. 2:11-21).

Paul, through both the style and message of his preaching, can be said to have legitimized 'vernacular Christianity'; yet he also embodied the tensions between the universal and the local which together have helped to spread the Christian way. As Saul, the Benjamite, he was a highly educated Pharisee, a strict observer of the Law. Yet he was also a Roman citizen by birth, educated in Greek, and it was under his Greek name, Paul, that he bore witness to the Gentiles, appealing to them through Greek logic, philosophy and literary style. This, more than his relaxation of the rule of circumcision, marks him as the apostle of both the universality of the Holy Spirit and the validity of the vernacular expression of its acceptance.


However eclectic Paul’s preaching was to his contemporaries, and however inspiring his eclecticism may now be to later generations of evangelists (see George Hagan below), there is a point at which the proclamation of universal faith and its necessary practical demonstration must take precedence over and alter local cultural idioms. The apostolic letter sent from Jerusalem instructing converts to abjure sacrificial meat and illicit marriages (Acts 15:23–29) may have been a considerable simplification of the Mosaic Law, but the imposition of even just the marriage prohibitions listed in Leviticus was to have profound social implications outside the Jewish world. The Graeco-Roman world’s adoption of the Jewish heritage, through the acceptance of the prophetic anointing of Jesus, was to have a significant influence on its intellectual and cultural life.

‘The Gospel accentuates contrasts’, one comprehensive history of Christianity has declared. The contrasts are there when a religion claiming universality attempts to supersede other religious traditions, at the same time necessarily attempting to validate its own truths according to the terms of the traditions it replaces. Such ironies were revealed all too clearly in the polyglot, urban, commercial milieu of Christianity’s early expansion; in its simultaneous rejection and assimilation of paganism and philosophy; and in its spreading of Latin and Greek as the expense of local vernaculars in Western Europe and Asia Minor while encouraging literacy in previously unwritten vernaculars elsewhere. At the time of the founding of the Christian Church, classical paganism was dynamically syncretic. In setting up its absolute intellectual and theological opposition to paganism and philosophy, the early Christian apologists were aggressive in their claims to exclusive truth. Yet culturally, Christianity could not help but be syncretic. While the growing heartland of Christendom could absorb the contradictions and ironies, these remained sharply defined, even matters for open conflict and confrontation, at the expanding margins.

The Church, we are frequently told, is the creator of modern Western European civilization. Through it was mediated the heritage of the Roman Empire; from its patronage emerged the humanism of the Renaissance, which culminated in the rationality of the Enlightenment. It bound the whole of Europe together within a common structure. This interpretation of European history, however, post-dates European expansion. The assertion of an organic coherence of the Western world is part of Europe’s reaction to its own expansion; an attempt to define retrospectively its distinctive difference from those other races and civilizations it encountered and increasingly came to dominate. It is an academic interpretation intimately associated with an internal Christian perspective upon the past. It defines and traces a universal theme, seeing in European civilization a providentially guided development.

whence culmination is its apocalyptic challenge to the rest of the world, repeating Christ’s challenge to all mankind. Through Europe, Christ (and civilization) is brought to the rest of the world, and the rest of the world must choose to submit or resist. Here Europe embodies Christ’s words, ‘I have not come to bring peace, but a sword’ (Matt. 10:34), and history is divided by that sword into two periods: before European expansion, and after the European arrival.

There are other ways of defining Europe. Fernand Braudel presents one which highlights the rich variety of experience which must be gathered together in the very attempt of identifying continuities. It is Braudel’s contribution to remind us that Europe was a conglomeration of different worlds and different civilizations within those worlds. Each civilization was a product, not of one single dominant cultural feature, but of a combination of cultural features themselves only loosely related to each other while set in an enduring geographical context. Thus there were contemporary civilizations which were Christian—the Orthodox, Latin and Iberian—but they were not Christian in the same way. Nor were they totally opposed to or immune from the non-Christian civilizations on the Muslim periphery of the Mediterranean world. Indeed, the Orthodox Greeks chose to submit to the Muslim Turks rather than to the Catholics, a decision we can more readily understand from Roger Ales’s description in this collection of persisting Greek attitudes towards Western Christianity.

We mention Braudel, not because we wish to expand or refine his theories, but because, as a historian, he has articulated a view of the enduring character of vernacular cultures—or civilizations—which helps orient our presentation of the comparative studies which follow. Each is concerned with a particular case of the context of ‘Christian experience’ or the appropriation of elements of ‘Christian religion.’ Christianity does not necessarily spread as an organic entity; partial elements, themes, symbols, practices, are characteristically taken up by a particular culture or civilization, ethnic, class, or interest group, at a particular time. ‘Civilization’ does not exist as a single ideal or a unitary phenomenom. Civilizations can overlap; they are not watertight. They are not easily mortal, but in Braudel’s phrase are ‘endlessly readapting themselves’. And in whatever way a civilization chooses to define itself at its centre, it is ‘most often on the border that the most characteristic aspects, phenomena, or tensions can be found’. It is there, on the fringes of civilizations, that ‘small sparks can set alight huge, long-lasting blazes’. The history of the contacts between civilizations may be a history of borrowings and even refusals, but not of a rise and fall. We are not dealing with a history of confrontations between ideal types. These points are particularly relevant in our recalling the conjunction between the nineteenth-century imperial expansion of European

nations, the changing definition of the 'pagan' world then, and that period's stimulation of the very subject of anthropology (themes explored in different ways by Talal Asad and Brian Street below).

Let us remember that the equation between 'Christendom' and Europe (more specifically Western Europe) is new. The early cradle and spread of Christianity was not Europe, but Asia Minor. By the time of Constantine's conversion, Christianity existed beyond the borders of the Roman Empire and was developing into numerous national Churches. Our modern study of 'Church history' is predicated on the assumption that there is, or once was, a universal Christian Church. Here again, an ideal is imposed on experience. There never was a Church. In the history of early Christian heresies, the Roman and Orthodox Churches emerged out of the struggle for political control, not just between the Western and Eastern empires, but over those small national Churches which existed on the fringes of empires: the Armenian, Georgian, Gothic, 'Assyrian' and other Churches. What remained beyond political control was shed as heretical. The 'Church' thus defined itself by reduction. 'Christendom' cannot really be said to have become a broadly inclusive and unifying concept until the explosion of Islam into the Mediterranean basin, claiming the old Christian heartland. In the struggle with Islam it was possible to contemplate alliances with the old heretical Churches, such as the Monophysites of Armenia and Nubia. But by the time of the first global expansion of Europe in the sixteenth century, 'Christendom' was equated with the provinces of the old Western, Latin, empire. 'Christendom' was Europe. Even Greece, now part of the Ottoman Empire, became classified as part of the 'Near East'.

By the mid-nineteenth century those European nations which were either already operating old empires, or expanding new ones, still defined themselves as Christian, but they had begun to separate the functions of government and trade from those of mission and faith. Christianity was seen as an entity in itself, an abstract entity to be compared with whole pagan religions, as comparable 'belief systems' on an evolutionary scale. This is a modern view. It finds its most extreme expression, and academic endorsement, in the rationalistic climate of the late nineteenth century.

The case-studies which follow are divided into three sections. The first includes an essay on 'old' vernacular styles so characteristic of some Mediterranean Christian countries, a style of vernacular connection between social life, personal and cultural identity, and religion which predates the modern industrial revolution and modern imperialism. This style disappeared with political changes in state religion in some regions and gave way to the modern circumstances of industrial society in others, but it has survived in some parts of rural Europe, and even—though reformulated—in former outposts of the old imperial empires. The essays consider modern Greece, medieval Nubia, modern Brazil, and Renaissance Spain and Italy.

We begin with Greece, where even remote villages continue their Church allegiance a part of their personal and national identity, while sometimes withholding themselves as individuals from its theological and disciplinary jurisdiction. The essay is based on Roger Just's observations in today's rural Greece, but the attitudes he describes are known to date back many centuries. Here, perhaps, not much has changed by comparison with the changing character of 'religion' in the social history of north-western Europe. With Ahmed Al-Shahi's commentary on the complete disappearance of medieval Nubian Christianity in both public and personal expression, we must ponder the question of how a Christian civilization can disappear so completely. The culture of medieval Nubia persists on many levels, as the work of Jay Spaulding has shown, but the political associations of Christianity rule out for modern Sudanese of the central Nile valley any overt recognition of this religion as a historical antecedent and cultural source. The real comparison perhaps is with the converse case of Just's Greece. The Greeks (and the northern Sudanese) do not view religion in the abstracted form of a self-sustaining theology separable from a national and political tradition and identity. It is what makes them 'Greek'. If to be Christian is to be Greek, then no one is a Christian in the fullest sense but the Greeks. For the modern Sudanese Nubians, Islam is equally a part of their national and personal identity. They might well feel that since they are Muslims, the ancient Nubians, who were Christian, cannot have been the 'same people' as themselves.

The disappearance of Christianity in Nubia raises the question of its co-existence with other religions in other parts of the early Christian world. Robin Lane Fox has recently shown how very rooted Christianity was in forms of existing, long-standing religious experience and expectation in ancient Mediterranean societies. It was only gradually, over several centuries, that the context of religious experience itself became Christianized, with the Christian appropriation, not only of pagan shrines, but of pagan prophecies, epiphanies and religious language. This change was accelerated, in part, by political events. In the Brazil of John Ryle's essay the dominant political and social context has been Christian for more than four centuries. Catholicism is a component of citizenship for the modern Brazilians. Ryle's essay as Orthodoxy is for modern Greeks. Yet, despite the pervasiveness of Catholicism, the religious experience of Afro-Brazilians still finds expression in old cults, self-consciously tracing their roots to a pagan past. Here the early confrontation between Brazilian Catholicism and African cults has given way to accommodation and even a degree of mutual appropriation. pagan continuities can still be found within old, well-established, Christian traditions.

The next essay focuses upon the older Iberian world itself: the Spain of four centuries ago. Here we see that Spanish Catholicism was no stranger to the types of paradox which are now a part of Afro-Brazilian religious life. Lárrain-Tolosana describes a women's religious movement firmly contained...
within the patronage of royalty and authority, even Church authority, strange perhaps to the modern eye than it was to contemporaries. Here there was room for paradoxes a later era might find difficult to accommodate: 'holy witches' and 'female priests'.

Jaymie Anderson's essay on Renaissance Italy also strikes a strange note for the modern Christian, but by analysing Old Testament and Apocryphal motifs as vehicles for the artistic expression of personal experience the reminder us that Christianity's cultural gift to Europe was not solely confined to the New Testament. Christianity brought with it not just the revelation of Jesus but the authority of the Hebrew patriarchs and prophets who preceded him. To many early Romans the antiquity of the prophets of Israel, whose prophecies Christ had come to fulfill, gave Christianity that added sanction of historical authority which the more recent Greek philosophers lacked. The 'proof' of Christianity is dependent, in part, on acceptance of the Old Testament as history, and as part of one's own history. The stories of the Old Testament patriarchs have continued to appeal strongly to converts in other societies and are often used in ways which make the revelation of the New Testament more personally relevant—witness the Dinka Salim Wilson's claim to descent from the Hebrew patriarchs as described by Johnson and the Shona diviner Timothy's glee—ings from Old Testament mythology as discussed by Bourdillon in this volume. They, like the Renaissance artist, found in the Old Testament a very personal message. Anderson's discussion of the artistic use of highly ambiguous head-hunting images in overtly 'religious' art suggests how very little these paintings might have to do with central concepts of doctrines of faith. This artistic tradition illustrates vividly the problem which confronted the Renaissance church as one of the great patrons of early humanist scholars, philosophers and artists, that of reconciling Christianity with the application of classical and non-Christian ideas and motifs to contemporary 'style' in life and social experience. It is perhaps ironic that the modern conception of 'Christian civilization' draws very heavily on the humanistic expressions of the Renaissance; yet the widely occurring modern distinction between 'pagan' and 'Christian' would rule out any serious use of head-hunting imagery in self-representation by modern Christians, whether Dinka, Uduk, Hawaiian, or even Italian.

The surprise, even shock, we feel at the contents of religious art in the past is a consequence of the great change in our own perceptions of religion that took place in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. The essays by Talal Asad and Brian Street, which follow, both draw attention to the nineteenth-century redefinitions of religion. They help define the nature of the break between the pre-modern (represented here by varieties of the Mediterranean vernacular) and the modern world. Asad traces the roots of the Western notions of rite and ritual, showing that their modern English gloss as 'symbolic performance', shared by theological and anthropological language, has a surprisingly recent origin (in fact the late nineteenth century). Prior to this time, from the medieval period up to the eighteenth century, 'ritual' meant a manual of instruction for the pragmatic performance of religious duties, 'rite' the body of practice of a given Church. The shift in meaning was related to a change in the notion of the person, for whom religious performance became an optional part of life, a demonstration of piety not to God but rather, perhaps, to fellow citizens. Religion in the pre-modern period was tangibly in the world in a manner that would positively come to smack of paganism to a nineteenth-century mind, intent upon the moral elevation of faith and the personal disengagement of the believer.

The link between rationalist theories of social evolution and Christian thinking in the nineteenth century is the theme of Brian Street's chapter on Captain Cook. The eighteenth-century Hawaiians were caught within a developing mesh of misunderstanding, created by European attitudes, as the death of Cook reverberated in the decades succeeding the event. As writers and commentators refined their views in the light of their growing evolutionary rationalism, a rationalism which ironically included contemporary Christian definitions of 'paganism', the Hawaiians were held to have revered Cook as a god. His death at their hands (capable of straightforward explanation if the earliest sources are read critically) acquired a religious significance which lent him quasi-martyrdom in European eyes. His death, like those perhaps of Gordon and other imperial legendary heroes, fed back into the vernacular Christianity of expanding Europe. While appropriating the person of their Christian representative, indeed dismembering him, the Hawaiians were not, however, engaging in spiritual combat on quite the same terms as were being laid down by Victorian England.

The industrial, political and intellectual revolutions of the last century began to draw that sharp dividing line between what are now termed the 'developed' and the 'developing' worlds. The nineteenth century lies like a geological fault, separating the past from its proper understanding by the present, defining our still-pervasive perceptions of 'the primitive' and 'the civilized'. In so far as we take for granted the modern imperial context of 'Christian' relations with the rest of the world, we are prisoners, in an intellectual and moral sense, of a recent European heritage. The imperial high noon was an important influence on the modern intellectual climate in which so many of us trained in social anthropology or history learned to perceive the 'pagan' worlds of those subject to European control and to assume, almost inevitably, that the relationship between Christianity and the world 'outside' is one of confrontation. This representation seems in part from an old Christian ideal, that Christianity is a challenge to the unredeemed individual soul. But it is also part of the vernacular Christianity of late imperial, industrial Europe. It is not surprising that the erosion of modern empires has challenged the validity of this confrontational picture. At the same time, Christianity has not been thrown out in its entirety by post-colonial societies; the scattered seed has found root in a variety of ways, some of them unpredictable, as elements of the 'taut' religion have been appropriated in a selective manner.

The third group of essays in this volume deals, in a variety of mainly African
contexts, with the consequences of the imperial encounter for the way in which Christianity was and is still being received by former subjects of European control. The old Christianity of Nubia, being enmeshed with the authority of the state itself, did not survive the installation of a new orthodoxy. At that time, it was scarcely possible for a disengaged Christian ‘religion’ to remain after Islamic conquest as an optional spiritual allegiance: such a retention would have required a secular state. But the retention of a moral and spiritual Christianity taught under modern empire, and the reformation of that religion, are indeed options open to citizens of today’s secularly defined states which have succeeded European rule in Africa. Christianity inherited through the nineteenth- and twentieth-century empires is outsizing the political framework of its transmission, perhaps partly because it was often presented as ‘pure religion’, distanced from political and other secular institutions. Where Christianity was never separated, as a disembodied ‘religion’, from the institutional structures of state authority, political change has sometimes blown away the official religion of the previous regime, as in Christian Nubia. But where there was no necessary organic link with state and secular life and the ‘religious’ sphere was defined autonomously, Christianity has become available for appropriation into a variety of new circumstances. There is on the ground a wide range of variation in the emphasis given to different strands in the selective adoption and practice of ‘the faith’. There may be found a series of exclusive definitions of faith and of church membership, while membership of a particular church can become a part of the assertion of ethnic and political identity.

Eva Gillies’ essay on the social and political context of conversion in the middle Niger belt illustrates the complexity of the ‘conversion experience’ on any part of the expanding Christian frontier. She emphasizes the local factors of ethnic loyalty and cultural interpretation which shape the very expansion of that frontier. Paul Heelas and Anna Marie Haghli-Heelas remind us of the inadequacy of modern sociological theories about ‘deprivation’ as a fundamental cause of conversion in the mission field. These theories have characteristic roots in utilitarian thought, and the critique clears the way for a fuller consideration of the problem. Conversion seems only rarely to involve the total acceptance of a new faith, or the complete transformation of religious expectation.

A complex process of the selective ingestion of partial elements of Christian discourse and practice has clearly taken place in some ‘missionized’ areas since the retreat of colonial rule, when a wide range of religious options may be open to newly independent peoples. Michael Boardilllion illustrates how selected themes from biblical myth have been adopted by non-Christians in rural Zimbabwe and woven into the vernacular corpus; Wendy James points to the easy adoption and elaboration of Christian songs and music by a wide range of Uduk-speakers in the Sudan whose formal Christian allegiance, especially after the departure of the missionaries, may remain rather vague; and George Hagan describes the search for direct spiritual experience among Christians in southern Ghana, a guarantee of authenticity which they draw from their pre-Christian tradition. Francis Deng’s essay provides a uniquely rich insight into the way in which the Dinka have drawn on their own moral and religious tradition in responding to Christian teaching, at first optimistically, though now less so. Douglas Johnson traces the careers of various Dinka who left their homes, or rather were obliged to leave them, and who became religious teachers elsewhere. In particular, the story of Salim Wilson, who became a writer and a preacher in Yorkshire, can be told in some detail, which suggests how closely he retained an inspiration from the religious education he had experienced as a boy in DinkaLand. He shared with several other Dinka ‘missionaries’ abroad—including Deng Lukkan, a prophet among the Nuer—a claim to spiritual authority deriving ultimately from the Dinka tradition of birth to a priestly lineage.

Because of the tendency to think in terms of an opposition between the Christian religion and those other domains of belief and practice into which it has been introduced, ethnographic studies of ‘traditional’ religion have perhaps over-drawn the distinctiveness, and separateness, of their subject matter, and historians have thought too much in terms of a holistic confrontation of systems. Over a decade ago Terence Ranger warned against the ‘dangerously misleading’ representation of ‘an essential African religion confronting an essential Christianity’ and proposed a ‘more particularist’ history of the development of African Christianity which took account of the social context of its practitioners and evangelists. In a recent lengthy review of current studies of religious movements (both ‘traditional’ and Christian) in relation to politics in sub-Saharan Africa, Ranger takes his focus even further from conventional church or mission history. By ‘movements’, he means ‘widespread and grassroots adherence to religious ideas, symbols and rituals, sometimes brief in duration, sometimes long-lasting; sometimes lacking and sometimes acquiring formal organizational structures; he deals with the ideational, emotional and creative’ and with ‘questions of “popular consciousness” rather than with the development of formal doctrines’. He seeks to illustrate tendencies in the recent Africanist literature of history and related disciplines in the social sciences which are converging upon a newly complex apprehension of religious politics in rural areas. A broad consensus is traced in which continuities from the pre-colonial past are recognized; in which the richness of religious response is not reduced to anti-colonial and nationalist political feeling; and in which the particular consciousness of rural people in penetrating and formulating the nature of their own situation is acknowledged. Here is a field of enquiry to be fruitfully shared by the historian and the social anthropologist; and it is by no means limited to the
African field, as Professor Ranger’s own comments on the recent collection *Frontiers of Christian Evangelism* remind us. The end of empire has made visible more subtle patterns of encounter than those which dominated our earlier perceptions of the Christian and the non-Christian. The ‘native’ has in places appropriated Christianity in such a way as to become more Christian than the former imperial master. This reminds us that Christianity itself in ‘the West’ has not always reflected an imperial view of the world, and indeed that for parts of its own (even recent) history it has been anti-imperial. Nor is the political aspect of Christianity always the most illuminating approach to its comparative interpretation; the personal, moral and intimate spiritual questions which have so often been pursued within the discourse of theology proper have less often been taken up in writings about Christianity in Africa, for example. But these come more easily to the fore in today’s more open and personal approach to matters of comparative faith. Several of the essays in this book trace the particular circumstances of individual people in their encounter with, and appropriation of, Christian belief and practice. A pervasive theme is easier to trace at this personal level than perhaps at the level of the confrontation with ‘culture’ or ‘society’. Christian identity, as a confusion of faith, does not bring with it or produce cultural and social uniformity; but because, as a personal experience, it inevitably goes with a characteristic sense of particular place or time, the theme of personal religious identity cannot be separated from that vernacular context. In this sense, every Christian is a native.

Roger Just

ANTI-CLERICISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY:
ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ORTHODOX
CHURCH IN GREECE

I

It is difficult to talk about a cultural response to Christianity in Greece, for Greece is a Christian country and Christianity is an essential part of Greek society's historical fabric. 'Responses' as such have been more on the part of outsiders. A British naval chaplain who arrived in Athens shortly after its liberation in 1824 was moved to write: 'It seemed as if, for the first time in our life, we were in a Christian city.' Not that enthusiasms were always so ecumenical: in 1874 The Rock informed its Protestant readership that the Ionian Islanders

like the Roman Catholics...pray to the Virgin and the saints, and though they do not worship statues, they adore relics and pictures, which are surely no less worthy (or unworthy) of Divine honours. They also believe that miracles have not ceased, and moreover, prove their faith by occasionally fabricating them.¹

In similar vein, the good Doctor Goodison could comment in 1824 that, with regard to the inhabitants of the Ionian island of Lefkada, . . .

a considerable portion of the year is devoted to feasting and idleness, which is

² The Rock, 22 April 1874.
Like every village, Spartohori had its church; like every church, it was dedicated to a saint (Agios Georgios); and, like every such saint, he was the village's patron. His name-day was the village’s festival or pantjeir; his icons marked the village’s exits and entrances, defining, an anthropologist might say, the inhabited space under his protection (though no one actually made that claim). The more pious—the old and especially the women—would make the sign of the cross whenever they passed these icons, just as they would cross themselves in a bus or a car whenever they passed any church or shrine. 

Every house, too, had its icons, kept in the bedrooms and tended by the women, who also cared for the village's icons, lighting every evening the small oil-lamps placed before the holy images. And though this was women’s work, icons were not a purely female concern. In the village and along the road men had erected icon shrines which clearly bore their makers’ names and the dates of their construction—labours undertaken in fulfilment of a vow, recompense for favours from the saint whose representation they housed.

Every stage of the life cycle—birth, marriage, death—was marked by Christian ritual; indeed, the life cycle was a Christian cycle. No child was ever referred to by any name until it had been baptized and had thus received, through the ministry of the Church and from its baptismal sponsor and ‘spiritual parent’, a name which was precisely a Christian name and the sign of its inclusion within the Christian fold. The bonds of godparenthood thus created—of assistance on the one hand and ‘respect’ on the other—were always honoured. The relationship was, after all, sacrosanct. Marriage, for its part, was inconceivable except in terms of a Christian mystery: all else was mere fabrication. Admittedly, at the time of my fieldwork civil marriage [and civil divorce] had not been introduced, and the state itself recognized no union of a Greek Orthodox subject which had not been celebrated by the Orthodox Church (nor, indeed, any marriage of any person which had not been conducted according to the rites of some religion). Rumours of reform were in the air, however, and the old men of Spartohori grumbled in the coffee-shops, with a logic I cannot lay bare but with an indignation I could certainly register, that if the sanctions of religion were removed not

5. For the role of the saint as a protector of a defined geographical area, see Kenis, ‘Icons in Theory and Practice’.


9. This is standard practice in Greece. Until a child is baptized and has received its name from its baptismal sponsor, it is customarily referred to by everyone, including its parents, simply as to me (the child or the baby).

10. The Statistical Year Book of Greece 1960 (Athens: National Statistical Service of Greece 1961) provides in English the following definition of marriage: ‘Marriage is the legal union of persons of opposite sex. The legality of the union in Greece may be established through celebration according to the dogma or religion of the parties. Marriage of Greek subjects not celebrated is considered non-existent in Greece [emphasis added].’ In 1963 Greek family law was revised, and both civil marriage and civil divorce are now permitted.
not a people much given to theological discussion. If any question of mine touched on the content of their belief, I would be referred to the priest; and since the priest was not an educated man and felt uncertain of many matters, he would suggest I ask a bishop. And no doubt I could have done so and worked my way up through the whole learned hierarchy—only to recreate, at a level far removed from the villagers themselves, the entire elaborate theology of the Orthodox Church, which certainly could not be considered the possession of the average Spartohoriot except perhaps by proxy and in name.

Maybe I do an injustice to some members of the community who might have been able to explain more than they cared to,14 but I suspect that what most Spartohoriots believed could be reduced to a fairly minimal set of propositions: that God exists and is in His heaven; that Jesus Christ, His son, is their saviour; and that the All-Holy Virgin and the saints are helpers to be appealed to in times of need. But most importantly, what the Spartothoriots believed was that they were Christians—adherents of the one true faith, members of the one true Church. It was their identity as Christians, as ‘believers’; which was the real object of ‘fierceness’—I believe that I believe’. The rest—of which they knew there to be a lot—could safely be left to priests, bishops and theologians: experts whose business it was to be learned in such things.

III

Such an untroubled relegation of spiritual concerns (and of doctrinal detail) to religious professionals is surely not exceptional. It is, I think, almost what one would expect to find in most European communities where Christianity is the unchallenged norm; and it is exactly what one would expect to find in a culture where for more than fifteen hundred years the Church has been established as God’s representative on earth. Moreover, it is an attitude which the Church itself (and not only in Greece) has frequently endorsed. A little theology is a dangerous thing. Better simple piety than thoughtless heresy. If there is one true faith, then the Church is its appointed guardian; for this, indeed, it was established.

The Church is Greece, however, is established not only as God’s

11. Nowadays most Spartohoriots die in one of the major hospitals in Athens. The body, however, is always brought back by canoe and carried (a ten-hour journey) to the village for burial. The decision of the aged pass with little public notice, but on their death the occasion of village-wide mourning. The entire population waits at the entrance of the village to the funeral ceremony; all will attend the burial; and all will present their formal condolences at the house of the deceased.

representative on earth. Orthodoxy is also the official religion of the state. The degree to which Church and state are technically separate is a question perhaps better left to constitutional lawyers to answer. According to official pronouncements, neither is subordinate to the other, and both have their independent spheres of influence over which they preside in a spirit of mutual respect. But the Church enjoys a 'special relationship' with the state, and, for example, all priests receive a government salary.15

The Church's special relationship with the state (not always a harmonious one) and the constitutional recognition of Orthodoxy as the official religion of Greece have been in force since the very creation of Greece as a sovereign state.16 But this incorporation of the Church into the structure of the state merely recognized at an official level the historical centrality of Orthodoxy in the self-definition of the Greek-speaking peoples. Under Ottoman rule, the populations of the Empire had been administered on religious rather than 'ethnic' or linguistic lines, with Orthodox Christians constituting the miller- ismus, the 'Rumos' millet, and within a few years of the Ottoman conquest the Orthodox Church saw most of its powers and privileges restored. The Patriarch of Constantinople became the Ottoman-appointed leader of all the Empire's Orthodox subjects (and it was precisely the Patriarch's inability to control his Christian flock which led to his execution on the outbreak of the War of Independence). It has been argued that under Ottoman rule the Church, which assumed jurisdiction over many civil as well as religious matters, was in fact more powerful than it had been during the period of the Byzantine theocracy.17

15. A summary of this relationship is presented in Greece, A Portrait (Athens: Research and Publicity Center, KEDEIS 1975), 'The relationship of the Greek State with the Church is not generic. It is not a case of a mere 'separation' of Church and State. The State provides for and protects the Orthodox Christian Church, which is a public utility, administratively and financially ...'

16. The very first article of the revolutionary constitution produced in 1821 proclaimed the Orthodox Church as the established religion of Greece. The progress of the War of Independence, however, meant that the clergy were cut off from the Patriarchate in Constantinople. When a new constitution was framed under the Bavarian monarchy in 1833, the Church was made subservient to the state and independent of the Patriarchate. Complete loyalty to Byzantine doctrine was proscribed, but the Greek Church became interdenominational and recognized the King (a Catholic) as its head (C. Fraser, 'Church and State in Greece', in J. T. A. Kromouzis, ed., Greece in Transition, London: Zeno 1977, pp. 130 ff.; D. Dakin, The Unification of Greece 1770–1829, London: Frances Reynolds 1972, p. 68). The Greek Church remains independent of the Patriarchate and is governed by a Synod of the Greek Church hierarchy, but now recognizes other heads than 'Our Lord Jesus Christ' (Greece, A Portrait).


Mon importantly, however, after four hundred years of Ottoman rule the real distinction was between Christian and Muslim, not between 'Greek' and 'Turk'. Indeed, up to the end of the eighteenth century and the importation of new forms of nationalism which were both Western-inspired and self-consciousness classicizing, the term 'Hellenic' (Greek) was scarcely employed by the native inhabitants of what was to become Greece.18 They called themselves 'Romatoi' (Romans), as had the Byzantine Greeks before them, or else they referred to themselves simply as 'Christians', to distinguish themselves from their hated Muslim masters. Within Greece itself, notions of 'national' identity, or indeed of 'Greek' identity, were largely lacking.19 What gave the Greek-speaking peoples of the Empire their cohesion (or such cohesion as they had) was their common faith and their membership of the Orthodox Church.20

With the creation of the Greek state, 'national' identity was superimposed on and merged with religious identity. To be Greek was (and for the most part still is) to be Christian.21 During the years of the recent military dictatorship, that equation was loudly proclaimed by the Colonels' slogan 'Greece of the Christian Greeks', and, as Woodhouse has noted, a good deal of religious symbolism was appropriated by their propagandists. The phoenix rising from the ashes may have been classical, but the proclamation which accompanied it, 'Greece is reborn', trampled unambiguously on the phrase with which every Orthodox Christian greets the arrival of Easter Sunday: 'Christ is reborn'.22 Such crude propaganda certainly did not deceive the majority of the Greek population, but however unconvincing its use, its symbolic basis was sound. For all but the most sophisticated of those most committed to a materialist philosophy, nationalism still incorporates religion. Indeed, the possession of the Christian faith is a matter of national pride, and the proposition that to be a Greek is to be a Christian is, in the minds of many, virtually a reversible one: to be Christian necessitates being Greek, since when one is talking about Christianity, one is, after all, talking about the one true holy Catholic


20. See John B. Campbell and P. Sherwood, Modern Greece, London: Ernest Benn 1978, pp. 175 ff. It should also be noted that in the population exchange made between Greece and Turkey in 1923 the sole criterion of 'ethnical' identity was in fact religion. All Muslims in Greece were deemed to be 'Turks' and all Orthodox Christians in Turkey were deemed to be 'Greeks'.

21. Note, for example, President Constantine Karamanlis's words in 1981: 'The nation and Orthodoxy...have become in the Greek conscience virtually synonymous concepts, which together constitute our Hellenic-Christian civilization'. (cited in Wael, 'The Church: A Time of Transition', p. 206).

and orthodox religion, Orthodox Christianity, seen as a uniquely Hellenic possession. Other sects have at best a doubtful claim to legitimacy.

This point of view was clear in Spartohori. The existence of Roman Catholicism was well-known—after all, the Ionian Islands and Greece as a whole have had contact enough with Catholic Italy. Inasmuch as it was assumed I was Christian, it was assumed I was Catholic, and, in my presence at least, the villagers were pleased to say that (the stance controversy notwithstanding) Orthodoxy and Catholicism were 'all the same'. But genuine uncertainties existed among the elderly about the extent of Christianity, and certainly about the variety of its forms.

I was frequently asked what religion was practiced in England and in Australia. When (admittedly with some liberty) I replied that the English and the Australians were Christians, this occasioned mild surprise; again it was assumed, however, that they would be Catholic. When I went on to explain that the majority were not Catholics but Protestants, I encountered perplexity. Some knew the term, but it was widely assumed that Orthodoxy and Catholicism exhausted Christianity; if there were such things as Protestants it was doubtful they were Christians.

It is important to stress, however, that this exclusion of Protestantism from the Christian fold was not caused by doctrinal dogmatism; it was, rather, the result of a quite pure form of religious ethnocentrism. How could anything which had no basis in Greece or which had failed to impress itself on the Greek consciousness be Christian? Since Greece was the centre of the Christian world, it could be said that there were unknown forms of Christianity flourishing elsewhere. The prejudice was nationalistic rather than theological, and it was, in fact, reinforced rather than dispelled by the overseas emigration to America, Canada, Australia and South Africa which had taken place since 1940s (and in the case of America, since the turn of the century); for those Spartohorians who returned were inclined to say that there was no religion to be found outside Greece, just as they were inclined to say that 'family life' was an institution peculiar to the Greeks.

Obviously these are matters about which various members of the Spartohorion community were better or worse informed and about which some variety of opinion existed. The extreme view, however, was presented by an old man who asked me what religion the English and Australians were and, when I replied that they were Christian, flatly told me this could not be so since Christianity was 'our' religion, the religion of the Greeks. I assured him that this was not the case: Christianity was a world religion. He concurred that other people could become Christians (the Catholics were Christians), but Christianity was nevertheless 'Greek'. How could the English be Christians? They did not have the saints, who were Greek saints, nor did they have the Bible, which was the Greek Bible. I protested that we had both, and (as I thought would be a telling point) mentioned that St George, the patron saint of Spartohori, was in fact the patron saint of England. This piece of information was greeted with frank incredulity; St George was Greek. And if we did have a Bible, then it could not be the same Bible. I admitted that we read the Bible in English, but assured him that it was the same Bible. Well then, if that were so, in what language had the Bible (or rather, the New Testament) been written? In Greek, I admitted, thus losing (as always) the argument.

The relegation of all spiritual concerns to the professional care of the Church and the equation of Christianity with Hellenism go hand in hand. In both cases, religion is not something to be pondered; it is part of a given identity. One is a Christian because one believes; one is a Christian because one is a Greek; what one believes is that one is a Christian Greek. It might also be assumed, then, that the Church and its ministers would command great respect; for if there is only one true faith, Greek Orthodoxy, which is the unique possession of God's chosen race, the Greeks, and if the content of that faith is to be held in trust by the established Greek Church, then the Church is placed in a position not only of moral, but indeed of civic pre-eminence. And yet, paradoxically, quite the opposite seems to be the case. I had thought that the Church would be the centre of village life; by men, at least, it went largely unattended. I had thought that the village priest would be a man of influence; he was openly despised. 'Hey, you with the hat' was a form of address I heard more than once, and for most of the year the priest could scarcely find an altar-boy to help him in his empty House of God.

It might have been that Spartohori's priest had individual failings, but I do not think so. What seemed to be held against him was simply that he was a priest. It might also have been that Spartohori was itself somewhat exceptional; but again I doubt that this was really the case. It must be admitted that Spartohori was a notoriously left-wing village within an area, Lefkada, well known for its left-wing sympathies. The majority of the older Spartohorians were, or had been, supporters of KKE, Greece's Moscow-oriented Communist Party of the Exterior—though during my stay there was a shift, especially among the young, towards Andreas Papandreou's PASOK socialist party (which triumphed in the 1961 elections). But anti-clericalism was
not confined to the left (and there were some staunch right-wingers in the village); more importantly, support for the Communist party by no means implied a rejection of Orthodox Christianity. It is worth pointing out that the old man who claimed the Bible, the saints and Christianity to be exclusively Greek had himself been a well-known communist guerrilla during the years of the occupation and the ensuing civil war, and he had remained loyal ever since to the communist ideal. Being a communist or leftist in Sparthoboli did not at all preclude being a Christian believer, while being a Christian believer in no way entailed a respect for the clergy or the Church. Religion (or rather, the profession of Orthodox Christianity as part of one's self-definition), anti-clericalism and polite allegiances were all separate phenomena which did not correlate. Almost everyone 'believed'; the majority were left-wing; and among those who had a good word to say for the Church or the clergy, moreover, such anti-clericalism appears to be quite widespread in Greece, and the priesthood and higher clergy the traditional objects of mockery, resentment and satire.

The oddity is, of course, that the people should be both left-wing and believers, nor that people should be both religious and anti-clerical. These two combinations are well known. The peculiarity of the Greek situation (at least as I experienced it in Sparthoboli) is that people should see in the very institution whose professional servants they decide the sole arbiter and guardian of the faith which they profess. To be a pious Christian and to reject the Church is one thing; but to relegate to the Church all spiritual concerns and to hold that the only faith acceptable is that defined by the Church and then to reject the Church seems paradoxical.

In logical terms that paradox cannot, I think, be resolved; and I would claim that in general people are quite capable of inconsistencies, especially when it comes to 'beliefs'. But if the paradox cannot be resolved, the situation can nevertheless be comprehended, even if this means taking the two elements of the paradox separately and not attempting to force them into some sort of 'rational' compatibility. After all, such an exercise was not undertaken by the Sparthobolians.

The 'ethnocentrism' of Greek religious beliefs has already been substantially accounted for. Historically, the vital difference between 'Turk' and 'Greek' was between Muslim and Christian. 'Ethnic' identity devolved on religious identity, and it was the Christian Church which supplied the Greek peoples with their sense of cohesion. To be Christian was to be Greek, and to be Greek was to be Christian. Inevitably, the form of Christianity subscribed to was that which had evolved in the Eastern Empire of Constantinople. In simple terms, there was no other choice. Orthodoxy and exhaust Christianity within the local setting. Nor was any other choice demanded or desired, for the commitment to Orthodoxy was not based on a search for spiritual truths within Christianity, but on a rejection of the encroachments of Islam from the outside. And if Catholicism was known, both through contacts with Italy and through Venetian occupation, it too was the religion of 'others'—of the Westerners, the Frangoi—foreigners, invaders and colonizers. Doctrinal differences may have preoccupied the theologians, with East and West declaring each other schismatic, but for the inhabitants of what was to become Greece it was not the niceties of dogma which made the Westerners' claim to Christianity suspect, but the very fact that on every count they were aliens—not Greeks, and therefore, within a Greek setting, not Christians. A rejection of the Orthodox Church, or rather, of the Orthodox faith as defined by the Orthodox Church, would thus be tantamount to cultural and national apostasy.

Within such a framework, then, and within such a tradition, criticism of the Church relates neither to its monopoly of spiritual authority, nor to a questioning of its doctrines. They remain unchallenged. Rather, criticism is directed towards what might be called the 'practical' conduct of its representatives and what, on a purely secular level, is seen as its privileged position.

V

In March 1821, Germanos, Bishop of Old Patras, raised the banner of revolt in the Peloponnese on the day now celebrated as Greek Independence Day. In Constantinople, the Patriarch Gregorios had already anathematized the leaders of the independence movement in the strongest terms, preaching the doctrine of dethronodonia, 'voluntary submission' to Ottoman rule, and drawing attention to the privileges enjoyed by the Empire's Christian subjects. No doubt Gregorios could have done little else, and even that did not save him (and much of the Christian population of Constantinople) from the Sultan's wrath. Nevertheless, Germanos' and Gregorios' near-simultaneous actions point to one of the major contradictions in the social position of the Greek Church. On the one hand, it functions as a national emblem, as a focal point of offered) to convert Christians. See Campbell and Sennard, Modern Greece, pp. 193-4, and Drakos, The Unification of Greece, pp. 10-11. For the degree to which Christianity receded under Islam, see S. Vronitir, 'The Greeks under Turkish Rule', in P. Diamandopoulos et al. (eds.), Hellenism and the First Greek War of Independence (1821-1829), Continuity and Change, Thessaloniki Institute for Balkan Studies 1976, pp. 5-16.


28. Gregorios was hanged from the limbs of a gate at the Patriarchate and his body thrown to a Jewish mob. Other members of the high clergy suffered similar fates.

25. Though Islam officially tolerated Christianity, attempts were made (and seduction
Hellenism; on the other, it has always been integrated into the power structure of society where, with its own vested interests to protect, it has been a conservative political force.

In popular history, it is Gregory's execution which is remembered rather than his opposition to the revolt, and again, in popular history, it is the Church's leadership of the Christian Greeks throughout their four hundred years of slavery which is celebrated rather than the degree to which, in much of mainland Greece, the Church represented an authority legitimized by Ottoman rule. But if, for the past, the mythologies of national and ethnic unity can overcome the historical inequalities of power and authority, the same is not true of the present, nor even of post-independence Greece. The Church emerged from the War of Independence as the largest single landowner in the country—indeed, it had been throughout the Ottoman period. And it remains the largest landowner, despite successive appropriations by various governments. In a country in which, up to the 1930s, the majority of the population were small-scale peasant agriculturalists and where even today the average landholding does not exceed 96 hectares, from a village perspective the Church is seen as belonging to 'the rich', 'the powerful', 'the big people', as being part of that remote and largely mysterious class whose fate has allowed to enjoy all the good things of the world at the expense of the downtrodden worker and peasant for whom daily life is an unending struggle. This attitude, which is both envious and indignant and which, whether justified or not, is characteristic of the Greek peasant's world-view, is not confined to members of the left. It should be remembered that the extreme right in Greece is a 'populist' right, that whatever the Colonels actually did, their rhetoric was in support of the 'little man' and that they went to some lengths to woo the vote (or backing) of the peasant sector (from which most of them had come). Those still loyal to the Colonels always point to their 'democratic' actions; to the fact that they rode roughshod over the traditional elite—an elite with which, in many people's minds, the Church is merged. On the other hand, the Colonels, of all people, espoused the Christian-nationalist equation, and for the members of the left, the Colonels' support for the Church and, on balance, the Church's support for the Colonels are further proof of its corruption and its alignment with the forces of oppression. In fact, the Church has seldom refrained from playing politics in Greece, and on the whole the politics it has played has been the politics of the right. 29

In the end, however, it is neither politics, nor the Church's part in politics, which prompts resentment of the Church. Rather, it is the cruder, or at least

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30. For an account sympathetic to the Church of its involvement in politics, see Travers, 'Church and State: A Study of Greek History'. It must be admitted that governments have tried to manipulate the Church quite as much as the Church has tried to manipulate governments—an inevitable consequence of the Church's incorporation into the structure of the state.

31. See Ware, 'The Church: A Time of Transition', pp. 311 ff.
their marriages and bury their dead. And for this not only does he get a
government salary—they must pay him!

It is this last feature—payment for the services which the priest alone is
competent to perform and which, as Christians and believers, the village must
receive—which most rankles and which is most complained of. In fact,
payments of this kind to priests are voluntary.” It would be possible to refuse.
But here self-esteem, philotimo, intervenes. No man of honour would wish to
appear so mean, or (an equally important consideration) so financially
constrained, that on the day of his daughter’s wedding or his child’s baptism or
his father’s death he should refuse to hand over to the priest an amount
sufficient to demonstrate his contempt for monetary considerations. And so
everyone pays individually, and everyone complains collectively. The priests
are ‘rapacious’—as rapacious as the Church itself, which, with all its fabulous
wealth, still has the audacity to ask for alms and accept contributions from the
old, the sick and especially the women in order to ensure the blessings which
ought to be every Christian’s natural right.

It makes little difference that most village priests (and certainly Spartohori’s
priest) are not wealthy men. The government salary received during the time
of my fieldwork was approximately fifteen thousand drachmas (£75) a month,
about one-third of what the lowest paid of Spartohori’s sailors were earning
and certainly insufficient to live on. The priest had to supplement his income
both by engaging in agriculture and by accepting payments. The problem is
that the village priests—as mere villagers—are themselves participants in the
continuous village struggle for esteem, and thus, like everyone else, continually
open to criticism. Only the priest, it would seem, has an unfair advantage. His
office, his role of priest is vital to the life of the community. And yet who is he
but a man, a villager, like everyone else? His salary is thus construed as
something he receives for nothing—or rather, as something which he receives
for being unprincipled enough to accept a sinecure. The spirit of egalitarian
competitiveness spares no one. Since the priest is a man like everyone else, by
definition he must be a hypocrite to have assumed the role of priest.

In this context, the actual accusations levelled against the priest become
remarkably petty or simply untrue (as, indeed, are so many of the accusations
with which the villagers pursue their continual struggle for moral pre-
eminence in a society which will brook no superiority). The priest did not
drink in the kaphenia. His status forbade him from joining in the more
boisterous celebrations of village camaraderie. But every time he passed one of
the ‘shops’, the sailors, with a blatant edge of mockery, would proffer him the
conventional invitation, ‘E, Pappa, ti the priest? ’ (‘Hey, Priest, what will you
[have to] drink?’). And the priest would embarrassingly refuse, caught between
the demands of his status and the rule that no man should be insulted by
having his hospitality refused. And when the priest had gone by and the

52. Such payments are known as pebria, ‘back money’. In fact, they are merely analogous to the
sort of gifts which were generally made supplementary to normal payments for services
rendered—even to nurses and doctors on the successful delivery of a child.
laughter had died down, it would be commented that the priest did indeed
'drink'—he drank 'at home', a standard accusation which, by some moral
alchemy, transformed a public pleasure into a private vice. Or else, in the heat
of the summer, my older friends—taunted 'believers' all—would speculate on
how much the priest must be sweating under his robes and with all that uncut
hair and beard. He must stink. It would do the priest good to be stripped of
his robes, barbecued like everyone else, and thoroughly washed. And there were
standard jokes. If the child did not resemble the father, then better ask the
priest why. And then, during fasts—which most people, and certainly most
men, broke—the trespassing of the ritual rules would be apologized for on
grounds of necessity. 'What can we do?' people would say, always adding that
it was all right for priests who could afford the luxuries of lobster and shrimp
(shellfish being exempt from the dietary prohibitions in force during Lent and
at other times). 'Besides,' as one man told me as he ate eating pork and shrimp
during Easter Week, when, of all times, the fast should be observed, 'faith is
faith, and food is food.' I know nothing about the dining habits of bishops, but
I know that Sparthohori's priest could never afford to eat a lobster—not
something true of all Sparthohoriots.

VI

The modest aim of this paper has been to describe a situation which struck me
as odd, or at least which was counter to my expectations: a situation in which
adherence to the Christian faith was in no way problematic, since it was part
of a given cultural and national identity, but in which respect for the Church,
freely granted the monopoly of authority in all spiritual matters, was neverthe-
less singularly lacking. By way of conclusion, I should like to relate one
complex anecdote which, though it involves more than Greece, seems to me to
draw together some of the threads of this description.

During my stay in Sparthohori, the Iranian revolution broke out. It was fully
reported on television, and events were closely followed in the coffee-shops. At
the time, the full import of the revolution was not clear. It seemed that it might
announce the triumph of democracy in Iran: the battle was against the Shah,
the Americans, inevitably the CIA, and all the forces of oppression. It thus had
the support of the left and of most of the Sparthohoriots. Enthusiasm was
slightly dampened, however, by two facts: first, the revolutionaries were
Muslims. It thus galled a little to support their cause. But second, and more
importantly, it was clear that their leader, Khomeini, was 'a priest'. Suspicions
were aroused. Khomeini seemed to represent the common man, the exploited,

39. The priest, of course, has access to women in a degree not shared by other men, and jokes
about the sexual exploitation of this advantage are legion, especially concerning the higher clergy,
who are de jure celibate.
the peasant. "But", I was asked on several occasions, "surely it is not a good thing for a ruler to be a priest?"

I spent the following Easter in the neighbouring village of Katomeri. On Saturday evening the church was crowded—the one time of the year when it was. After the joyful midnight announcement that 'Christ has arisen', the congregation dispersed with their lighted candles. Outside the church, however, the students (who had returned for the occasion from Athens with their families), most of whom were strongly left wing, had continued another tradition, for they had constructed a bonfire on which they had placed the conventional figure of Judas the Jew, the betrayer of Christ. As the bonfire blazed, however, I noticed an innovation. Judas wore a sign round his neck on which was printed the name 'Khomeini'. The symbol was, I think, complex (even if it had been done on the spur of the moment) and multifaceted. Judas the Jew and Khomeini the Muslim: both the enemies of Christendom, both triumphed over by the Greeks. But I think the students were also up to something else: the figure that burned was also Khomeini the priest, a sight to greet their own popes as he exited from his church.

Ahmed Al-Shahi

NORTHERN SUDANESE PERCEPTIONS OF THE NUBIAN CHRISTIAN LEGACY

People of the northern Sudan inhabit a semi-desert region. Apart from the riverine Nile, where most of the people live as sedentary agriculturalists, the rest of the region is barren, consisting of deserts with some rocky outcrops and inhabited by nomadic groups. Despite the unfavourable ecological conditions, this region has attracted outsiders who came originally to proselytize and spread their religions. The process of religious conversion and reconversion began with the ancient Egyptians, followed by Christian missionaries from Egypt, themselves succeeded by the arrival of Arab/Muslims from Egypt and Arabia. In addition to those who came for religious reasons, others were drawn to the northern Sudan by its supposedly rich natural resources and for trade and slavery. However, to the present-day population of the north, neither the temples of the ancient Egyptians and indigenous Sudanese dynasties nor the ruins of Christian churches and monasteries have much cultural or ideological relevance. Rather, it is the two major Islamic institutions, the mosque and the Koranic school, which are of fundamental religious and ideological significance to the people. Islam has superseded previous religions; but it is interesting to examine in their historical context the pre-Islamic religions and cultural influences on northern Sudan and, in particular, the legacy of Christianity.

In view of its geographical proximity and vested interests, Egypt has had and continues to have a greater cultural and political influence on the Sudan than the rest of its neighbours. The ancient Egyptian dynasties contributed to the civilizations of the northern Sudan in the fields of religion, arts,