Résumé
R. Horton — Les lunettes judéo-chrétiennes : aubaine ou fléau pour l'étude des religions africaines ?
Jusqu'à une date récente, l'étude comparative des religions africaines était dominée par des anthropologues occidentaux de tendance personnelle athée ou agnostique. Cette tendance « orthodoxe » est battue en brèche par une nouvelle vague, en partie africaine, d'ethnologues, théologiens et philosophes d'inspiration chrétienne, qui constituent l'« opposition dévote » à l'orthodoxie antérieure. Les uns comme les autres ont nécessairement recours à deux niveaux d'interprétation : la « compréhension par traduction », qui permet le passage à l'« explication approfondie ». Le premier niveau implique l'emploi de procédés ou « recettes » qui, pour les dévots, consistent en un recours pur et simple au discours religieux occidental — ou judéo-chrétien —, tandis que, dans l'explication approfondie, les facteurs « mondiaux » tels que l'économie, la technologie, les rapports sociaux, etc., sont négligés. R. Horton, reprenant, sur le mode du discours scientifique, les attaques du poète ougandais Ogot P'Bitek, critique avec alacrité le réductionnisme dévot, en se fondant sur l'interprétation factuelle du vécu, infiniment plus divers que ne le présente le discours sur les universaux.

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Judaeo-Christian Spectacles: 
Boon or Bane to the Study of African Religions?

Introduction

For much of the past fifty years, the study of the indigenous religious heritage of Africa has been dominated by social or cultural anthropologists of Western origin and agnostic or atheistic religious views. In recent years, however, the dominance of this set has been challenged by a new wave of scholars, some Western and others African, who repudiate the established approach to the field and advocate a radically different one. Some of these scholars, such as Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner, have been anthropologists by formal professional affiliation. Others, like Idowu, Mbiti, Gaba and Harold Turner, have been affiliated to such disciplines as theology and comparative religion. Yet others, such as Winch, have been philosophers.¹ They are united, however, by a methodological and theological framework which has been strongly influenced, first and foremost by their own Christian faith, but also by a long tradition of comparative studies of religion carried out by Christian theologians.

The only outsider to have taken the challenge of the new wave of scholars at all seriously seems to have been the Ugandan poet/anthropologist Okot P'Bitek, who gave us a devastating exposé of some of the weaknesses of the new approach in his little book African Religions in Western Scholarship (1971a). The book, however, was written in a

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furious, poetic, acid style rather than in cool, sober academic prose. And although some people, myself included, found this style both splendid and apt, it seems to have allowed many academics both old-style and new to convince themselves that P'Bitek's critique could be shrugged off. On top of the reaction produced by the style came the failure of the publishers to keep the book in print and the untimely death of the author. These various circumstances seem to have joined to prevent the book from having any great impact. Nonetheless, P'Bitek's critique was in many respects a penetrating one; and anybody embarking on a more sober and systematic critique will find himself compelled to re-iterate its basic points. He may also find himself strongly tempted to reproduce some of the author's verbal acid-drops! Both basic points and acid-drops will be liberally used and acknowledged during the course of this essay.

Although they are the butt of the criticisms of the new wave of scholars, anthropologists in the established tradition have not taken the challenge very seriously. By and large, they have brushed it aside with short impromptu critiques which have not really penetrated their opponent's defences.

This cavalier attitude to the new wave is, I think, unwise. For its influence is growing apace. From the beginning, its members have been in control of the thinking and teaching of nearly all of the burgeoning religious studies departments in African universities; and they have continued to consolidate their hold on these departments. More recently, they have begun to gain influence in the universities of the United States and Europe, where the effective study of the indigenous religions of Africa had earlier been a monopoly of 'orthodox' anthropologists. Their growing self-confidence is epitomized by an uncompromising manifesto, issued recently by one of their leading spokesmen (H. W. Turner 1981), whose message is that the only way forward in the study of African religions is one which follows their line.

Being acutely aware of the growing influence of the new wave, and at the same time very doubtful as to the value of its basic approach, I believe that a serious and sustained critique is overdue. In what follows, I shall try to sketch the outline of such a critique.

Since members of the new wave have not, so far, given their movement a name, the expositor/critic is faced with the problem of finding a convenient label. Some years ago, in an attempt to solve this problem, I coined the phrase 'Devout Opposition' (Horton 1975): 'Opposition' alluding to members' adversary attitude to the more established approach; and the qualifier 'Devout' alluding to the deep influence of personal Christian faith on their own approach. Although this label is far from satisfactory, it seems to have caught on to some extent (see, for instance, Wyllie 1980). So, for want of anything better, I shall continue to use it in this essay.
The Common Ground

Before embarking on an exposition and critique of the specifics of the 'Devout' approach, I should like to say a few words about certain very general features of this approach which the 'Devout' share with their 'orthodox' anthropological opponents. What I have to say may seem banal and abstract; but, as the reader will later see, it does serve to establish a framework within which the 'Devout' position and its relation to its 'orthodox' counterpart become more readily intelligible.

Both the 'Devout' and their 'orthodox' opponents are involved in the comparative, cross-cultural study of thought-systems. In this role, they utilize two distinct levels of interpretation, which I shall provisionally label 'translational understanding' and 'further explanation'.

By 'translational understanding', I mean the kind of understanding of a particular thought-system that results from the successful translation of the language and conceptual system that embody it into terms of a language and conceptual system that currently enjoy 'world' status. In talking of translation, of course, I am not just talking of the provision of dictionary equivalents for individual words or sentences. I am talking about finding a 'world-language' equivalent for a whole realm of discourse, and of showing, in 'world-language' terms, what the point of that realm of discourse is in the life of the people who use it. Translation, in this broader sense, can be very arduous. There may be no realm of discourse in the 'world' language that exactly fits the bill. We may have to bend and refashion existing realms, and even redefine their guiding intentions. We may have to recombine realms that have become separated during the evolution of the modern condition. Arduous though it may be, however, this operation is the vital preliminary to any further interpretative steps.2

There is nothing mysterious in all of this about the role of a 'world' language and its associated conceptual system. The 'world' status simply reflects present-day demographic and political realities. And these may of course change drastically in the future. Nonetheless, they are the realities of today, and they do provide the raison d'être of this kind of translation. In the first place, given these realities, such trans-

2. Credit for making social scientists engaged in cross-cultural studies aware of the central importance of translational understanding must go in the first instance to Evans-Pritchard and his colleagues in the Oxford Institute of Social Anthropology of the 1950s and 1960s (see esp. Evans-Pritchard 1962a, 1969). For a short but important contribution by Evans-Pritchard's close associate, see Godfrey Liembardt 1954. Inspired at least in part by the Oxford school, a number of philosophers also made useful contributions to the discussion of this topic during the same period. For representative contributions, see Winch 1958, 1970; Quine 1960, esp. ch. 1-II; Gellner 1962; Lukes 1967; Hollis 1967, 1968. For two more recent discussions by social scientists, see Crick 1976; S. P. Turner 1980.
lation is the most economic means of bringing the characteristics of a particular thought-system to the attention of a world-wide audience. Secondly, without prior translation of all the various thought-systems of the world into terms of a common language and conceptual apparatus, there can be no comparison of such thought-systems with respect to their differences and similarities. And once again, given current realities, a ‘world’ language and conceptual apparatus would seem to be the best means of making this comparative exercise accessible to a world-wide audience.

It is the differences and similarities revealed by the comparative exercise that call forth interpretation at the second level: that of ‘further explanation’.

Differences, perhaps, are the most provocative. Thus it may be that, in two thought-systems, we find comparable realms of discourse using different sets of conceptual means to achieve similar ends. For instance, we may find that, in two otherwise comparable bodies of theory, two totally different models are used to explain the same field of phenomena. Or we may find that, in two otherwise comparable bodies of poetry, two totally different sets of symbols are used to adumbrate the same area of human feeling. Again, it may be that, in two thought-systems, we are faced, not just with different means toward the same end, but with different balances between disparate ends. Thus one thought-system may emphasize poetic thinking and de-emphasize pragmatic thinking, whilst another may squeeze poetry into a corner and exalt pragmatism. Differences of this kind have fascinated curious students of humanity; and they have commonly given rise to ‘further explanations’ couched in terms of differences in the technological, economic, social and political backgrounds of the societies concerned.

Although differences have proved the most fascinating to the enquiring mind, similarities have not been without their allure. Thus some comparativists have claimed that there is a ‘central core’ of common-sense, everyday pragmatic thinking which has remained constant in all societies down the ages since the dawn of humanity. Others have claimed that certain symbolic themes have been similarly reiterated in all societies down the ages. And yet others, as we shall see in this essay, have claimed universality for the conception of God. Such similarities have also called forth gargantuan efforts at ‘further explanation’, this time in terms of universals of the human condition, either biological, psychological, social or spiritual.

A worthwhile comparative study of thought-systems can only be achieved by treating both of these levels of interpretation as equally important. Some comparativists are so keen to get on to ‘further explanation’ that they take inadequate pains with ‘translational understanding’; and the result is grandiose nonsense. Others put all their effort into ‘translational understanding’ but abstain from any attempt
at ‘further explanation’, feeling, it seems, that there is an element of hubris involved in pursuing the latter; but however admirable their modesty, the result is a failure to meet the demands of legitimate curiosity concerning the working of the human mind.

As we shall see in what follows, the ‘Devout’, in pursuing the comparative study of African religions, have engaged themselves with both these levels of interpretation. And any critique must examine their performance at both levels.

The ‘Devout’ Opposition: An Outline of the Specifics of their Approach

I - Translational Understanding

If the above analysis is correct, it follows that, at the heart of every approach to the comparative study of thought-systems, there must be a particular set of translation recipes. It also follows that one of the roots of distinctiveness in any given approach is likely to be the distinctiveness of its set of translation recipes.

In fact, it does seem that the most fruitful way of comparing the various approaches to the study of African religions is in terms of their basic translation recipes. Thus many late 19th- and early 20th-century approaches can be understood in terms of a recipe that relied on the half-formed language and conceptual apparatus of Western infants. Similarly, the fashionable ‘symbolist’ reaction to these approaches can be understood in terms of a recipe that advocates reliance on the symbolic discourse of Western adults as manifested in such verbal arts as poetry.

Again, a more recent and highly esoteric approach advocates reliance on that realm of Western discourse that the philosophers have labelled ‘performative’. Yet again, the ‘intellectualist’ reaction to the ‘symbolists’ and ‘performativists’ advocates heavy reliance on the theoretical discourse of the modern West as manifested in the language and concepts of the sciences. Finally, the ‘Devout’ reaction to all of these other approaches can be understood in terms of a rejection of all other translation recipes in favour of one which relies on modern Western religious discourse.

For the ‘Devout’, the main thing wrong with the translation recipes

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3. For the classic exposition of this recipe, see Tylor 1871.
4. For the clearest and most systematic exposition of this recipe by a scholar with a special interest in African religions, see Beattie 1964, 1970, 1973.
5. The foremost proponent of this recipe is S. J. Tambiah 1973, 1981.
6. For the latest version of a thoroughgoing intellectualist approach, see Horton 1982.
of other schools is that they classify religious discourse as a variety of some broader type of discourse. Since religious discourse is quite distinct from other types of discourse both in its rules and in its aims, such classification leads to travesty. 7

The 'Devout' are quite clear as to the remedy. The scholar must turn to the religious discourse of his own culture as a translation instrument. Some members of the movement, indeed, would go so far as to maintain that a scholar lacking in personal religious experience is thereby deprived of the means of understanding the religious thought and life of another culture. In support of this view, they quote Pater Schmidt's famous rebuke to Renan: 'If religion is essentially of the inner life, it follows that it can be grasped only from within. But beyond a doubt, this can be better done by one in whose inward consciousness an experience of religion plays a part. There is but too much danger that the other (the non-believer) will talk of religion as a blind man might of colours, or one totally devoid of ear, of a beautiful musical composition.' 8 Since the 'Devout' are, by definition, Christians, it follows that, in their own work, their main translation instrument is Christian religious discourse.

So much for the general character of the 'Devout' translation recipe. Let us now turn to look at the picture of African religious thought that results from its application. For convenience, we may consider our findings under three headings: 'focal objects', 'attitudes', 'aims'.

(a) The Focal Objects of African Religious Thought

In the 'Devout' view, all systems of African religious thought, without exception, are focussed on the same ultimate object: the supreme being or God. He created the world and sustains it; is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. He is the ultimate Upholder of the good in human life, and the ultimate adversary of the bad. Though conceived of up to a point in human terms, he is nonetheless so inscrutable and mysterious in his ways, so startlingly different from human beings in most of his attributes, that he can only be regarded as 'wholly other'.

'Devout' scholars recognize African belief in and commerce with multiplicity of lesser spiritual forces; but they tend to emphasize that the

7. For strong statements along these lines, see EVANS-Pritchard 1956 (esp. the preface and ch. XIII), 1962a, 1965 (esp. the concluding chapter); V. W. Turner 1962; ch. III; H. W. Turner 1966, 1969, 1977, 1981; Winch 1970.
9. For the useful terminology of 'focus' and 'focal object', I am indebted to SMART 1973.
10. For emphasis on the mysterious and inscrutable aspect of the supreme being, see EVANS-Pritchard 1956; ch. XIII; V. W. Turner 1962; ch. III; IDOWU 1973: 75; Mbiti 1970: xix-xv.
African worshipper regards such forces as mere intermediaries between himself and the supreme being, and as agencies whose powers and very existence depend, in any case, on the will of this being (Evans-Pritchard 1956; Mbiti 1969, 1970; Idowu 1973; Arinze 1970: 8-31; Metuh 1981: 48-104). One of their most prominent spokesmen (Idowu 1973: 135-136) so discounts the independent reality of the lesser spiritual forces in the minds of worshippers that he feels justified in referring to African religious thought generally as ‘Diffused Monotheism’.

(b) The Attitudes of African Worshippers

‘Devout’ scholars tend to follow Rudolf Otto in stressing a unique religious attitude or emotion in which awed fascination with the mysterious and uncanny bulks large. This attitude may not be very obvious in people’s relations with lesser spirits. But it becomes more obvious in their relations with greater divinities and most obvious in their relations with the supreme being himself. This complex and unique attitude is a response to the immense and amazing powers of the supreme being, and to its mysteriousness and inscrutability (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 311-322; Idowu 1962: 129-130; 1973: 52-54).

(c) The Aims of African Religious Life

‘Devout’ scholars may sometimes concede that African religious thought does have something to do with explanation, prediction and control of events in the everyday world; but they typically assert that these are not its central concerns. Rather, as their guiding definitions suggest, they assume that, for the African worshipper, the relation between man and God is something of intrinsic value, and the attainment of communion with God the overriding aim of life.11

11. For a very clear assertion, by one of the founders of modern comparative religion, of the importance of communion as the real end of all religions, see WACH (1947: 383, 386, 391): ‘The ultimate source and the meaning of an expression or form valid in the realm of religion is its origin from and testimony to a significant religious experience. Wherever such expressions are genuine, they are meant not to serve external— that is social, political, economic or personal— aims and purposes, but to formulate and perpetuate man’s deepest experience, his communion with God. [...] Because a wide range of ostensibly or allegedly religious acts and rites can be shown to be of a pragmatic character, all religious acts and rites have been suspected by some older and modern critics, who are inclined to draw from these instances conclusions as to the pragmatic character of religion in general. Such a generalisation is entirely unjustified. [...] Religion is sound and true in its nature only as long as it has no aim or purpose except the worship of God.’ Though Wach himself never did any research in the African field and seems to have known little about African religions, his work is widely cited by those of the ‘Devout’ who have come up via the discipline of comparative religion, and has clearly been a formative influence on their views.

A second major aim of African religious life is suggested by certain remarks in the writings of Idowu and H. W. Turner. Thus Idowu (1973: 176, 188) talks on the one hand about the Yoruba sense of a fallen, evil-ridden world, and on the other about the Yoruba (and African) yearning for paradise. In similar vein, H. W. Turner (1981: 14) talks about an African sense of ‘distorted existence and lost destiny’. With these phrases, our authors seem to be hinting at the presence, in African religious thought, of the idea of a flawed temporal world from which the individual yearns to escape into the perfection of eternity. At this juncture, it is perhaps worth remembering that, in Judaeo-Christian thought, this yearning for escape into eternity is closely linked to the yearning for communion; for in this tradition the eternal plane is the ‘abode’ of God.

Three authors who are uncomfortably aware of the apparent prominence of the linked goals of explanation, prediction and control, yet go to great lengths in arguing that the real goal of African religious life is communion are Gaba (1973, 1978), Zuesse (1979) and Winch (1970).

The splendid ingenuity with which Gaba transmutes an apparent overriding concern with this-worldly welfare into a fundamental concern with communion can be seen in the following passage:

'Through the performance of rituals Anlo man hoped to achieve one definite goal: the fulfilment of his material needs. Ostensibly this may indicate a complete absorption with this-worldly concerns. However, as I have tried to indicate before, in Anlo thought existence is always a personal involvement in transcendence. And so the visible, the physical, the profane is an indispensible vehicle for or true reflection of, the invisible, the metaphorical and the sacred. In effect, the traditional Anlo man's preoccupation with worldly concerns is a preoccupation with the realisation of a positive I-Thou relationship. Indeed it is not a fundamentally different attitude from that which makes him objectify his concept of religiousness in the entire ritual of worship.

Salvation then is equivalent to deliverance from material want in all its manifestations, and peace can be equated with material contentment. This concept of salvation does not negate the view of man in Anioland as homo religiosus. For this brand of “materialism” is simply a manifestation of the totality of existence in the sacred presence where no destructive forces can dwell. As such, it is a symptom of salvation in the milieu of homo religiosus, of salvation as the totality of involvement of being in Being' (Gaba 1973: 3-4; also see 1978: 390-400 for his arguments).

In Zuesse again, we find great rhetorical ingenuity deployed in the attempt to demonstrate that what appears to be a predominantly this-worldly emphasis in reality something very different. Zuesse starts off by assigning African religions to the category ‘religions of structure’ and Western Christianity to the category ‘religions of salvation’. Religions of structure accept and rejoice in the things of this world. Religions of salvation promise the adherent escape from the things of this world. From this initial distinction, it looks as though Zuesse means to suggest that African religions and other religions of structure are oriented to this-worldly goals such as fecundity, prosperity, health and social harmony, whilst Western Christianity and other religions of salvation are oriented primarily to attaining communion with God. (Indeed, this is what the publisher's blurb promises.) Soon, however, we find that this is far from his intention. What he wants to say is that, for all the value they set on this-worldly things, African religions value such things, not in themselves,
2 - Further Explanation

'Devout' scholars are seldom totally hostile to 'further explanations' of African religious phenomena couched in terms of technological, economic, social and political factors.\textsuperscript{12} Thus both Idowu (1973: 59-61, 132, 137, 148) and Mbiti (1969: 30; 1970: xiii) admit that the numerous variant elaborations of African religious belief are the outcome of the operation of such factors. More specifically, Idowu alludes to the process of anthropomorphism whereby a particular pattern of human social relations influences the spiritual conceptions of men living within that pattern.

but as symbols of and avenues of approach to 'transcendental otherness'. By contrast, Western Christianity tries to attain communion with the transcendental with the minimum use of this-worldly symbolism. In other words, although the means are very different in the two cases, the end is the same.

The following passages sum up Zürse's view (1979: 4, 243). The first relates to the goal of religions generally: 'The core of religion is the experience of and aspiration after the Holy; this is the real point of all cults.' The second relates to African religions in particular: 'African spirituality, above and beyond the specific focus of particular ritual actions, is always a piety directed toward the sanctity of the universe as a whole. Every action on its deepest level seeks to sustain the divine order and its continual self-regeneration; in this sense, every ritual enactment, however superficially oriented to utilitarian goals, is utterly selfless.'

Like the other two authors, Winch (1970) admits that African religions appear to be directed to this-worldly goals. The appearance, however, is deceptive, and the reality quite other. As to what the reality is, the following passage (ibid.: 104) gives us the key:

'I in Judaeo-Christian cultures the conception of 'If it be thy will', as developed in the story of Job, is clearly central to the matter I am discussing. Because this conception is central to Christian prayers of supplication, they may be regarded from one point of view as freeing the believer from dependence on what he is supplicating for. Prayers cannot play this role if they are regarded as a means of influencing the outcome for in that case the one who prays is still dependent on the outcome. He frees himself from this by acknowledging his complete dependence on God; and this is totally unlike any dependence on the outcome precisely because God is eternal and the outcome contingent.

I do not say that Zande magical rites are at all like Christian prayers of supplication in the positive attitude to contingencies which they express. What I do suggest is that they are alike in that they do, or may, express an attitude to contingencies; one, that is, which involves recognition that one's life is subject to contingencies, rather than an attempt to control these.'

Despite broad 'Devout' agreement on this matter, it should nonetheless be noted that there is at least one prominent dissenting voice. Here I refer to J. S. Mbiti. For all his uncompromising insistence on the centrality of the supreme being in African religious thought, Mbiti (1969: 67) breaks ranks quite definitely on the matter of the overriding goal of African religious life, as comes out very clearly in the following passage: 'And this faith [in God] is utilitarian, not purely spiritual, it is practical and not mystical. The people respond to God in and because of particular circumstances, especially in times of need. Then they seek to obtain what he gives, be that material or spiritual; they do not search for him as the final reward or satisfaction of the human soul or spirit. Augustine's description of man's soul being restless until it finds its rest in God, is something unknown in African traditional religious life.'

\textsuperscript{12} I am grateful to R. W. Wyllie (1980) for reminding me of this.
Similarly, in his monograph on Nuer religion, Evans-Pritchard (1950: 121) talks of ideas concerning the lesser divinities as products of a process whereby the idea of God is 'broken up by the refracting surfaces of nature, of society, of culture, and of historical experience'. H. W. Turner, at present perhaps the most prominent 'Devout' spokesman on methodology, once committed himself to the extreme view that the specifically religious factor always works through these more mundane factors!13

Nonetheless, with the exception of Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner, 'Devout' scholars have not been noted for serious and sustained exploration of the influence of mundane factors on African religious thought. And even the two scholars just mentioned have always insisted on the limits of such influence. Indeed, all 'Devout' scholars would seem to share the conviction that explanations in terms of mundane factors can only take us a little way into the understanding of religious thought and action. For them, although the variable features of African religious thought can be ascribed to the influence of mundane factors, its invariant theistic core can only be accounted for in terms of a specifically religious factor (Evans-Pritchard 1962a, 1965; V. W. Turner 1962: ch. iii; H. W. Turner 1966, 1969, 1981).

In defining this factor, the 'Devout' use such phrases as 'the universal response to the Divine', 14 'the interplay between revelation of the transcendent and the response of the human' (H. W. Turner 1981: 13), and 'the personal awareness of God on the part of man through God's own initiative' (Idowu 1973: 56). Common to these phrases are three basic assumptions. First, that there is a supreme being with approximately the attributes assigned to him by the modern Judaeo-Christian tradition of religious thought. Second, that he has endowed all human beings with awareness of his presence and desire for communion with him. Third, that he has endowed all human beings with some ability, albeit an inadequate one, to make veridical reports concerning his presence and his nature. For the 'Devout', it is these assumptions that provide the ultimate explanation of religious thought in Africa as indeed in other parts of the world.

The reader encountering 'Devout' explanatory ideas for the first time may well feel puzzled by them. Why, he may ask, should psychological and sociological explanations be considered appropriate to the variable features of religious belief but inappropriate to the invariant theistic core? And why should explanations in terms of the presence of the object and of human awareness of this presence be considered appropriate to

13. H. W. Turner 1966: 293. Turner's argument here comes very close to giving the game to his opponents. For they could with some justice use it to claim that the theological factor should be omitted on grounds of intellectual economy. Such a conclusion, of course, he would find unthinkable.

the invariant theistic core but inappropriate to the variable features? Reading between the lines of much 'Devout' writing on this matter, we soon come to see that these ideas are connected with the belief that the variable features represent the veil of human error whilst the invariant theistic features represent the inner core of truth. This connection becomes explicit in the writings of Evans-Pritchard (1956: 121-322; 1965: 121), who asserts that, where we are dealing with human error and illusion, as in the case of the variable 'refractions' of spiritual reality, the appropriate pattern of explanation is indeed one that invokes mundane psychological and sociological factors, but that, where we are dealing with true belief, as in the case of the invariant theistic element, the only appropriate explanation is one that refers to the presence of the object of such belief and to human awareness of this presence.

Interestingly, this maxim has been shared to a remarkable degree down the years by both atheistic and theistic students of religions. However, because of their differing ideas as to which beliefs are erroneous and which true, they have drawn very different conclusions from it. The atheists have used it as a licence to provide psychological and sociological explanations for all aspects of religion, and have gone on to treat the possibility of producing plausible explanations of this kind as a sort of proof of the illusory character of the focal objects of religious belief. The theists, as we have just seen, have used it as a licence to ban attempts at psychological and sociological explanation of the allegedly invariant theistic features of religion. They have also greeted the inadequacies of the psychological and sociological explanations offered so far with a sort of grimly gleeful 'We told you so'; as if these inadequacies in some way proved the truth of theistic beliefs.

Since the study of religions has attracted and seems likely to continue to attract fair numbers of atheists as well as of theists, the dominance of this maxim seems to threaten us with a tragic impasse, in which people of opposed religious convictions are for ever destined to pursue irreconcilable programmes in their attempts to interpret the same area of data, and in which different interpretative programmes are for ever destined to be treated, not on their merits, but as symbols of mutually hostile metaphysical convictions. Some eminent scholars on both sides of the divide seem to have accepted this impasse with sad resignation. So far as the study in which we are all engaged is concerned, however, this

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15. A reading of the major atheistic theorists of religion from Tylor down through Marx and Freud to Durkheim makes it clear that they did see their explanations as helping to establish the falsity of religious belief generally. In this respect, Evans-Pritchard (1962a, 1963) seems nearer the mark than Wyllie 1980.
17. On the atheistic side, this resignation is evident in Fortes 1980. On the theistic side, it is evident in Evans-Pritchard 1965: 121.
looks like a counsel of despair. As to whether or not we are forced to accept it, this is a question which I shall consider in the next section of the paper.

The ‘Devout’ Approach: A Critique

In the critical appraisal that follows, I shall use the same headings and sub-headings as those I used in outlining the ‘Devout’ position. The reader may refer back accordingly.

1 - Translational Understanding

(a) The Focal Objects of African Religious Thought

The ‘Devout’ translation recipe is most obviously misleading when used to convey information about the focal objects of indigenous African religious thought. True, it avoids the worst conceivable excess: that of finding translational work for the terms for all three persons of the Trinity. Nonetheless, it does insist on finding such work for a fairly unamended Judaeo-Christian concept of God the Father; and given the realities of African religious thought, this is to say the least unfortunate.

It is true that, in many African cosmologies, we do find the concept of a supreme being who created the world and sustains it. But the other salient attributes of this being are often very different from those of its Judaeo-Christian counterpart. It may not, for instance, have the unambiguous association with the morally good that is always attributed to the Judaeo-Christian supreme being. Thus John Middleton, in his *Lugbara Religion*, shows us that the Lugbara supreme being is associated as much with evil as he is with good. And it seems to me that other ethnographic monographs suggest something similar.18 Again, the supreme being may not have the same sex as its Judaeo-Christian counterpart. Among the Ijo-speaking peoples of the Niger delta, for instance, this being is thought of as a woman and is referred to as ‘Our Mother’ (Horton 1962, 1965). One does not have to be a sexual chauvinist to see this as a fairly fundamental difference of concept! Yet again, the aura of mystery and inscrutability with which the ‘Devout’ tend to clothe the supreme being is remarkable for its absence from many of the more painstaking monographs on the religious thought of particular

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18. On the evil aspect of God in Lugbara thought, see Middleton 1966: 250-262. In many other ethnographic descriptions, the supreme being seems to be morally neutral, and certain lesser spiritual agencies such as the spirit of the local community earth and the ancestors to be the guardians of morality.
African cultures. In many such works, it is true, we find not only the concept of a supreme being, but also confessions of ignorance of many of his/her ways. What we don't seem to find is the sort of positive celebration of his/her mysteriousness and inscrutability that is so characteristic of modern Judaeo-Christian thought.  

A central feature of Judaeo-Christian religious discourse is, of course, that it celebrates the primacy and centrality of the supreme being as against all lesser spiritual agencies. And the 'Devout' translation recipe has tended to transfer this celebration to characterizations of indigenous African religious systems. Once again, we are faced with a powerful source of translational misunderstanding.

Where there is an indigenous concept of a being who created and sustains everything in the world, we might, on grounds of consistency, expect to find prominence given to a conception of the lesser spirits as mere manifestations of the supreme being, or as little more than intermediaries between man and this being. However, in many instances where there is a more or less clear idea of a being who created and sustains everything including the lesser spirits, thought about the relation between such a being and the lesser spirits is not, in everyday contexts, pressed this far. In such instances, the lesser spirits, to all intents and purposes, are thought of as realities in their own right, as independent sources of volition and action, and as the ultimate recipients of much everyday ritual attention. 'Devout' failure to recognize this has led to grave errors of interpretation.

A sobering example of what can happen in this respect is provided by the literature on indigenous Igbo religious thought. In this field, a line of 'Devout' scholars has established, over the years, the usual image of a world-view in which lesser spiritual agencies are considered as manifestations of and intermediaries with the supreme being, and in which the spiritual portion of man is thought to go and stay with this being in the after-life. Recently, however, S. N. Ubah (1982), an Igbo historian brought up in a more open sceptical tradition, decided to return to his own home community, to gather data on its religion by means of field-

19. One of the things for which P'Bitek (1971: 110) takes the 'Devout' to task is the imputation to African peoples of a celebration of the unknowability of God. Thus he says: 'Mbiti wrote, "May God forgive me for attempting to describe him, and for doing it so poorly. Even if I am presenting here the wisdom and reflections of many African peoples, it is only at its best an expression of a creature about the creator. As such it is limited, inadequate and ridiculously anthropocentric. God is still beyond our human imagination, understanding, and expression." Most African peoples know the names, abodes and characteristics of their deities. They know them by the diseases they cause. The task of the diviner is, precisely, to determine which deity is responsible for a particular misfortune, and how to deal with it. In northern Uganda certain chiefdom deities were carried from place to place. The knowledge of Africans about their deities are not limited, inadequate or ridiculous in any way.'
work more intimate and more prolonged than that conducted by his
‘Devout’ predecessors. In the course of his field-work, Ubah took
particular care to distinguish the views of those who, especially in their
formative years, had had little or no exposure to Christian influence, from
the views of those who, whilst not themselves Christians, had had much
greater exposure to such influence. And in making his translations, he
kept in mind the possible adverse consequences of overreliance on a
Judaeo-Christian translational apparatus. The results of his work
must have come as a shock to his ‘Devout’ colleagues. In the first place,
he found that, in the thought of those not overly exposed to Christianity,
the lesser spirits were autonomous agencies who received human entreaties
and offerings in their own right and in no way as intermediaries with the
supreme being (Ubah 1982: 91-94). Secondly, he found that, in the
thought of the same set, people were no more closely associated with the
supreme being in the after-life than they had been in the everyday
world. In his own words: ‘The ancestors, who had had little to do with
the supreme being here on earth, appear to have found him no less
withdrawn in the other world’ (ibid.: 103). It was only in the thought
of those with much greater exposure to Christianity that he found
anything like the ‘Devout’ version of the Igbo world-view.

It is fascinating to find that, despite their formal pronouncements on
the relation between God and the lesser spirits, several leading ‘Devout’
thinkers, in their less guarded moments, unwittingly concede that what
Ubah says about an Igbo world-view may be much more widely true.
Thus there is a passage in Idowu’s African Traditional Religion (1973:
173) in which, having propounded his idea of ‘Diffused Monotheism’, he
admits that it is more of an ideal than a reality, and that although
African religious thinkers should treat the lesser spirits purely as mani-
festations of the supreme being, in fact they treat them all too often as
forces in their own right. Again, there is a passage in one of Ezeanya’s
articles (1969: 41-42) in which the author, having stated that the supreme
God is commonly believed to have created the lesser spirits as his agents,
goes on soon afterwards to say that ‘this is more so in theory than in
practice’. Yet again, there is a remarkable statement in Mbiti’s African
Religions and Philosophy (1969: 58), in which, having repeated the credo
that the lesser spirits are thought of as intermediaries between man and
God, he says this means that God is the ultimate recipient of sacrifices,
‘whether or not the worshippers are aware of that’. In the case of the
statements by Idowu and Ezeanya, the alert reader will feel immediately
moved to ask in whose head the ‘ideal’ and the ‘theory’ reside. And in
the absence of any evidence offered to the contrary, he can only conclude

20 For ‘Devout’ accounts of the Igbo world-view, see EZEANYA 1963, 1969;
that these things reside in the heads of the authors and not in those of the people whose beliefs they purport to describe. In the case of the statement by Mbiti, the same reader will want to know who is the holder of the belief that God is the ultimate recipient of all sacrifices in those cases where the worshipper 'is not aware of that'. And here again, the answer can only be that the holder is the author, not the worshipper. In these passages, it seems as if the sheer weight of recalcitrant reality has forced our authors into self-refuting slips of the tongue!

Over-pressing the 'Devout' translation recipe can also lead to a deceptive picture of the sheer amount of time, energy and thought allocated to the supreme being and lesser spirits respectively. Thus the 'Devout' all too often give the impression that such allocation overwhelmingly favours the former. In fact, however, even in cases where assertion of the ontological primacy of the supreme being is fairly unambiguous, allocation of time, energy and thought is often strongly in favour of the lesser agencies. In Yorubaland, for instance, the life of the oríṣa devotee centres, in these respects, upon the oríṣa rather than upon the supreme being.\(^{21}\) And in Kalabari, the life of a medium of an ọwù or water spirit centres, in the same respects, on the ọwù rather than upon the supreme being.\(^{22}\) In both cases, assertions of the ontological priority of the supreme being are clear enough. At the same time, however, there is a very obvious sense in which this being is peripheral rather than central to religious life.

In the cases we have been discussing, there can be no dispute about the presence in people's thought of definite conceptions of a supreme being. Also beyond dispute, however, is the variety of such conceptions, with respect, both to the attributes accorded to the being itself, and to ideas about his relationship with the lesser spirits. Equally beyond dispute is the fact that, in these respects, many if not most indigenous conceptions of the supreme being are far removed from that peculiar to modern Judaeo-Christian thought. To ignore this fact can only lead to interpretative disaster.

One's apprehensions about the 'Devout' approach increase when one turns to consider a number of cases where it is clear that indigenous thought postulates, not one supreme creator and sustainer, but two coeval and coequal forces.

One long-attested case is that of the Fon of the precolonial kingdom of Dahomey. Here we find the creation and sustaining of the world attributed to the female deity Mawu, who is associated with the earth, the west, the moon, the night and the rising sun, and her male consort.

\(^{21}\) On the lives of oríṣa devotees, see Beier 1959; Wescott & Morton-Williams 1962; Barber 1981.

\(^{22}\) On the lives of water-spirit media, see Horton 1969.
Lisa, who is associated with the sky, the east, the sun, the day and the setting sun. The two deities are thought to carry on their work through a third force, Dan, who is often described as their servant. This dualistic conception of the forces underpinning the world is considered by some historians to be relatively recent in the kingdom (perhaps only two or three hundred years old) and to have replaced an earlier conception of a single supreme being called Nana Buluku. However, although some versions of the cosmology preserve traces of the transition in the idea that Mawu and Lisa are children of Nana Buluku, others accord supreme status to Mawu and Lisa, and omit any mention of a parent. So there can be no argument about the existence, among certain Fon thinkers and worshippers at least, of a genuinely dualistic tradition of cosmological thought.

Again, despite Idowu’s characterizations of Yoruba religious thought as ‘Diffused Monotheism’, a series of reports published over the last twenty years have made it clear that, in some parts of Yorubaland at least, a more dualistic conception of the forces underpinning the world prevails. Thus Morton-Williams’ work strongly suggests that, in Oyo Yoruba cosmology, Heaven and Earth are regarded as coeval and coequal forces. Heaven is the source of individual destinies, and also presides over the sky-dwelling orisha spirits. Since the latter are associated not only with aspects of wild nature but also with individual fortunes, this gives Heaven a double link with human individuality. Earth presides not only over the spirits of the various settled territories, but also over ancestral spirits. Through both these categories, it is associated with community and morality. More recently, Babayemi, an Oyo son as well as a professional historian, has not only broadly confirmed Morton-Williams’ picture, but has given it some further elaboration. Thus he shows us how the balanced but uneasy relationship between Heaven and Earth is thought to underly and account for several areas of tension in everyday life. Notably, it is thought to be the root cause of the endemic struggle between the alaafin (backed by Heaven) and the Oyo mesi (backed by Earth).

A similar dualism involving Heaven and Earth has been pointed out in Idoma, Igbira and Mosi religious thought. There are even rumours of dualism among students of Igbo religious life. Thus one writer (Chukwukere 1983) has suggested that the concept of the supreme being associated with the name Chukwu has spread relatively recently from

23. For a relatively recent summary of our knowledge of Fon cosmology, see ARGYLE 1966: 174-200.
24. For strong suggestions of a basic dualism in the Oyo Yoruba cosmology, see MORTON-WILLIAMS 1960, 1964. For a more recent and more explicit statement, see BABAYEMI 1981: 56-62.
25. For Idoma, see ARMSTRONG 1962. For Igbira, see PICTON 1968. For Mosi, see ZAHAN 1973: 110-113.
Aro-Chukwu to other parts of Igboland, and that it was preceded by a
dualistic outlook which saw the forces of Chi and Eke as controlling the
world between them. And only recently, I came across the record of a
conversation between a Catholic priest and an old man from the north-
western Igbo village of Ihembosi, in which the old man, with some hesi-
tation, it seems, in the presence of the priest, appears to be expounding a
dualism involving the heavenly force Chukwu and its earthly counterpart
Ana.26

In the clearer of these instances of dualism, there can be no justifica-
tion whatever for picking out one of each pair of forces postulated by
indigenous thought and calling it ‘God’. Yet in these instances, this
would seem to be the only way of squaring the ‘Devout’ translation recipe
with the facts.

If the ‘Devout’ recipe looks dubious in the face of dualistic conceptions,
it looks worse still in the face of those cases in which apparently reliable
reports indicate absence of any concept, either of a single overarching
creator/sustainer, or of a pair of such creators/sustainers.

Two such cases stand out with particular clarity. One is Monica
Wilson’s report (1959: 154-165) on the Nyakyusa, the other Okot P’Bitek’s
work (1971b) on the Acholi. Both authors state quite unambiguously
that, in the whole gamut of the indigenous concepts of the peoples they
are concerned with, they are unable to find one of a creator/sustainer of
the world. In both cases, it seems, people’s interest is concentrated on
their local polity and its environment, and upon the heroes, ancestors
and nature spirits whose actions determine the outcome of events in this
local arena. There seems no good reason to doubt the competence and
good faith of these two authors. Both had an excellent training in social
anthropology. Wilson, although she was an outsider to Nyakyusa
society, conducted intensive field-work through the indigenous language.
P’Bitek was an Acholi son and a distinguished poet both in English and
his own language.

Nor are these the only cases of their kind. I have given them prom-
inence because of their clearcut character. But there are a number of
others in which the data, though more ambiguous, seem to point to the
same conclusion. Thus in a report on the religious ideas of the Gogo of
East Africa, Rigby (1966) mentions a being called Maduwo, referred to,
sometimes as a world-creator, but more often as a vaguely defined malev-
olent force better known in strange far-away places than close to home.
Rigby, with good reason, wonders whether such a being can really be
understood as the supreme being of the Gogo. Again, a number of

26 Conversation between Father R. G. Arazu and Ezenwadeyi of Ihembosi
scholars concerned with the religious history of the Shona-speaking peoples have pointed to a certain amount of evidence that Mwari, taken fairly unanimously by modern non-Christian Shona to be the creator and sustainer of the world as a whole, may in earlier ages have had a more restricted and local role. If this evidence is taken seriously, it then becomes an open question whether or not the Shona entertained the concept of a supreme being in earlier times.27

The last point leads us on to a more general consideration. So far, we have been discussing discrepancies between present-day patterns of focal objects in the indigenous cosmologies and ‘Devout’ stereotypes of them. And we have seen that these discrepancies are considerable, indeed sometimes huge. However, we have not yet taken into account the fact that much of our knowledge of these patterns is derived from areas long under the twin influences of Christian missionary enterprise and the accelerated social change of modern times. In what follows, I shall suggest that, had we been able to view the indigenous religions before the impact of these twin influences, we should, in all probability, have found the discrepancies even more dramatic.

Now, in many if not most cases, we lack the data that would have enabled us to delineate the patterns of focal objects as they were at the time when these influences first appeared and to chart changes in them from that time onward. Non-Christians all too often maintain stoutly that their present ideas as to the focal objects of their cosmologies are age-old, and deny that anyone could have developed these ideas in the recent past without their being aware of the fact. And there are no collateral data which would enable us to check the historical validity of this stance. Nonetheless, there are a number of cases where the views of non-Christians can be checked, either because the scholar who records them has himself made an earlier study of the religious system in question, or because he has access to other data which provide evidence as to the earlier situation. And a review of these cases gives us the basis at least for some tentative generalizations.28 The broad picture that emerges is one of two mutually reinforcing processes.

On the one hand, missionaries busily engaged themselves in extracting from the peoples they were attempting to evangelize names for the supreme being. Sometimes, it seems, the peoples involved could only produce the names of lesser spiritual forces, and it was the missionaries who deceived themselves into thinking that they were in possession of indigenous names for the supreme being.29 Sometimes, those concerned

27. For doubts as to the earlier status of Mwari, see Bucher 1980: ch. II and VI.
28. The works by Wilson, P’Bitek, Ubah and Bucher cited above all give some picture of changes in the patterns of focal objects, in particular indigenous religious traditions, consequent on the advent of Christian missionary influence. For additional case studies, see Horton 1970; Lienhardt 1982.
29. Wilson (1959: 154-156) shows how the missionaries who came to Nyakyusa
were able to produce appropriate names; but even then the missionaries reinterpreted them to give them a more Christian flavour (Horton 1970; Lienhardt 1982). Having extracted these names, missionaries then attempted to use them to persuade their audiences that their own religious outlooks were 'in-a-glass-darkly' adumbrations of the Christian message, and that, as such, they should be abandoned in favour of the latter.

On the other hand, the peoples on the receiving end of missionary activity found themselves in an era of rapidly expanding social horizons for whose comprehension their parochially oriented cosmologies were not fully satisfying. Some responded to this situation by entering the Christian fold and adopting in large measure what they could grasp of the Christian cosmology. Many others, however, were unwilling to go so far so fast. These preferred to remain outside the Christian fold, and to cope with the shortcomings of their cosmologies by re-working them so as to restore their adequacy. Faced with such a task, nonetheless, they also found certain elements of the missionary message concerning the supreme being particularly congenial to their purposes, and used them freely to create new though still unmistakably indigenous syntheses. In the course of such re-working, ironically, they often took back from the missionaries items of religious vocabulary that were subtle transformations of items which the missionaries themselves had earlier extracted from them.30

The result of these mutually reinforcing processes was that the patterns of focal objects in the indigenous cosmologies moved much

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30 For a more elaborate exposition and defence of this thesis, see Horton 1971, 1975.
closer to that characteristic of the Judaeo-Christian tradition than they had been to start with.

Inference from the small number of cases in which relevant evidence is available to sub-Saharan Africa as a whole is of course not without its dangers. Nonetheless, it does seem probable that the changes we have sketched here were widespread. It follows that, great as are the discrepancies between present-day patterns of focal objects in the indigenous religions and 'Devout' stereotypes of them, they are probably as nothing compared with the discrepancies which we might have seen had we had wider access to the earlier indigenous traditions.

All in all, then, it seems that the 'Devout' translation recipe has given us a severely distorted picture of the focal objects of African religious thought. Here, perhaps, we ought to give the last word to Okot P'Bitek (1971a: 88), who summed up the situation with the angry protest: 'The African deities of the books, clothed with the attributes of the Christian God, are, in the main, creations of the students of African religions. They are beyond all recognition to the ordinary Africans in the countryside.'

(b) The Attitudes of African Worshippers

Since the 'Devout' have, by and large, not written in such detail about the attitudes of the African to his gods as they have about the characteristics of these gods, they have exposed less of themselves in this respect to the probing critic. Nonetheless, they have made their salutations to Otto and to his idea of a uniquely religious attitude; and we must ask ourselves how useful or otherwise these salutations are.

In recent years, the debate about attitudes to spiritual agencies in the indigenous religions has centred on attitudes to the ancestors; and we may as well make a start by considering these. Although the debate is far from closed, the upshot so far seems to be an emphasis on continuity between the attitudes to the ancestors and those to living elders. There are, of course, qualifications to be made. Attitudes to ancestors often overemphasize one component of those to living elders and underemphasize another. An example can be drawn from Fortes' painstaking work (1961, 1965) on Tallensi relations with the ancestors, in which he shows how the component of fear and respect is played up, and that of warm affection played down. Again, attitudes to the ancestors are influenced by the fact that, under normal circumstances, the latter are not directly seen or heard, but rather give indirect responses to human approaches at relatively long intervals. Nonetheless, it does seem that the central features of emotional and relational commitment to the ancestors are continuous with the central features of commitment to living elders.

31 For milestones in the debate, see Fortes 1961, 1965; Kopystoff 1971; Brain 1973; Sangree 1974; Mendonsa 1976; Müller 1976.
Furthermore, the monographic work reveals nothing in concept or behaviour that might be held comparable to the attitude of fearful fascination with the uncanny so central to Otto's 'Idea of the Holy'.

If we turn to the cults of non-ancestral spirits, much the same picture emerges. Here, the attentive student will very likely be struck by the sheer variety of attitudes: a variety which is clearly correlated with that of the spirits themselves. Sometimes, indeed, he will be struck by the sheer variety of attitudes to the gods, even within the confines of a single religious system. A good example here is provided by Yoruba religious life, in which a very broad spectrum of attitudes, ranging from amused tolerance to fearful respect, is a clear correlate of the equally broad spectrum of characterizations associated with the orisa spirits (Beier 1959; Wescott & Morton-Williams 1962; Barber 1981). Despite the variety, however, careful scrutiny shows the same underlying continuity between the attitudes to spiritual forces and those to living people as we saw in the ancestral cults. Thus a mischievous but benign spirit receives the same amused indulgence as would a mischievous but benign human being. And a powerful but touchy spirit receives the same fearful respect as would a powerful but touchy father. Once again, moreover, monographic work on the non-ancestral cults has failed so far to reveal anything parallel to the Ottovian fascination with the uncanny.

At this point, some 'Devout' scholars will object that what we have been considering are attitudes to the lesser spirits. They will insist that it is in relations, not with such lesser agencies, but rather with the supreme being that we must look for the 'distinctively religious attitude'. Even if we carry out this injunction, however, we are likely to find ourselves chasing a mirage. In the first place, in the numerous instances where the supreme being lies at the periphery rather than at the centre of the religious consciousness, we can only characterize attitudes to him as apathetic. Secondly, where the supreme being lies nearer the centre of consciousness, much of what I have said about attitudes to the lesser spirits seems equally applicable. Once again there is some variety, which correlates with variety in the characterization of the supreme being. Once again, nonetheless, there are strong continuities between attitudes to the supreme being and attitudes to living people. Thus a female, maternal supreme being receives the same sort of attitudinal and emotional response as does a living mother; and a male, paternal supreme being receives the same sort of response as does a living father.

32. IDOWU (1973: 178-183) and MBITI (1969: 8-9), to take two examples, seem anxious to differentiate attitudes to the ancestors from attitudes to the supreme being.

33. The apathy of Azande toward the supreme being is well described by Evans-Pritchard (1962b). His remarks could well be used to characterize the attitudes of a dozen other peoples.
Finally, even at this level, there is little evidence of anything that might be held parallel to or translatable into terms of fearful fascination with the uncanny.

These conclusions accord well with what I said earlier about the absence, in pre-Christian, pre-Islamic settings, of any great positive celebration of the mysteriousness and inscrutability of the supreme being. For it is only in relation to these qualities that the Ottovian religious attitude makes sense. Hence, where they are not celebrated, we should not expect to find it.

In short, then, there would seem to be considerable discrepancies between the realities of African religious attitudes to spiritual agencies and 'Devout' assumptions about such attitudes. Once again, it would seem that the 'Devout' translation recipe, if overenthusiastically pressed, will lead us into trouble.

(c) The Aims of African Religious Life

The 'Devout', as we saw, are in broad agreement that the overriding aim of African religious life is communion with spiritual being, such communion being felt and conceived as an end in itself. And it seems sensible to start by asking just how far this view of things corresponds with the prevailing realities as reported in the corpus of monographic work on the indigenous religions.

The monographic evidence on this point, it would seem, is overwhelmingly negative. In work after work, we find that explanation, prediction and control are the overriding aims of religious life. People want a coherent picture of the realities that underpin their everyday world. They want to know the causes of their fortunes and misfortunes in this world. They want to have some way of predicting the outcomes of their various worldly projects and enterprises. They want, above all, to have the means of controlling events in the space-time world around them.34 These aims provide the measure of the efficacy of the gods; sometimes even the measure for decisions as to whether to retain their services or dismiss them.35 In relation to those aims, the quest for communion takes definite second place. In some cultures, such as Acholi, it seems virtually absent.36 In others, such as Yoruba and

34. I shall not try here to list the monographic material that either intentionally or unintentionally makes this point. To do so would be to include virtually every monograph that has successfully portrayed the indigenous religious heritage of an African people in the context of everyday life.

35. For changing perceptions of efficacy as important determinants of the rise and fall of cults in the indigenous religions, see Goody 1957; Horton 1962, 1965; Barber 1981; Okike 1982.

36. See P' BITER 1971b. It may well have been P' Bit'er's grounding in Acholi religious life which led him to place such heavy emphasis on the pragmatic element in his general remarks on African religions.
Kalabari, it has overriding importance for a small number of rather special people, but means little to the majority. And even for this small number of special people, it should be remembered, the communion aspect of the man-spirit relationship is developed with one or other of the lesser spirits, and not with the supreme being (Horton 1969; Barber 1981).

Perhaps the most impressive evidence for the overriding importance of explanation, prediction and control as goals of religious life in sub-Saharan Africa comes from continent-wide reactions to Christianity.

By world standards, the sub-Saharan reaction to late 19th- and early 20th-century Christian missionary efforts was spectacularly positive. Hundreds of thousands of people up and down the continent poured into the mission churches with every sign of enthusiasm and sincerity. Indeed, as I pointed out earlier, although the message of an active, morally concerned supreme being was a new one in many areas, it was a message that people found particularly apt in the new circumstances they faced. Yet twenty to thirty years later, tens of thousands of these people were pouring out again into new foundations that called themselves Christian but differed in important respects from their ‘orthodox’ predecessors. And the trend has continued down to this day, to the point where even the leaders of the older Churches are forced to concede the greater vigour and appeal of the new institutions.

Why this spectacular reverse movement? From the observable differences between the old and new institutions, and from the abundant comments of leaders and followers in the latter, the root cause emerges with stark clarity. Once within the walls of the mission churches, ‘converts’ found themselves faced with a concept of the goals of the religious life just like that imputed to them by the ‘Devout’: a concept which made communion with God not just an end in itself, but the overriding end of the religious life. For people used to the idea that the powers of spiritual forces were there first and foremost to be tapped to improve man’s lot in the here and now, this was a strange and comfortless concept. Hence an almost immediate drive to build up and enroll in institutions which repeated the new message of an active, morally concerned supreme being, but restored the old priority of explanation, prediction and control of the events of the everyday world.37

Even the ‘Devout’ have quailed in the face of these realities; which is why some of them have preferred to talk of appearances being deceptive rather than to deny them flatly. But when someone says that certain appearances are deceptive, the burden of proof is on him. And what we have had on this from the ‘Devout’ so far has smirked more of passionate assertion than of cogent argument backed by evidence.

37 For a sample of views on this matter of leaders and members of neo-Christian Churches drawn from all over the African continent, see Horton 1976: 176.
So much for the alleged primacy of the quest for communion. What of that other element that features so prominently in the Judaeo-Christian heritage: the quest for release from this world to another and incompa-

rably better one beyond the grave? Here, I think, we need to proceed carefully in order to avoid the accusation of setting up and attacking straw men. For some of the ‘Devout’, notably Mbiti, have asserted very clearly that this element of the heritage has no parallel in the African traditions (Mbiti 1969: 4-5; Metuh 1981: 153-154). Nonetheless, as we saw earlier, there are passages in Idowu and H. W. Turner which indicate that they are tempted to posit this aim as having a central place in African religious life. Some cautionary comment may thus be in order here.

In order to judge the validity of the claim that the quest for the ‘other world’ is an important feature of the indigenous traditions, it would seem sensible to turn for evidence to what we know of indigenous conceptions and evaluations of existence after death.

The first thing to be acknowledged is the variety of such conceptions. Some are so negative and attenuated as to make the claim seem quite ridiculous. Such, for example, is the Tiv conception, in which, at death, the spiritual portion of the individual loses contact with the living only to linger on indefinitely in a joyless realm that no one would ever think of comparing favourably with the world on this side of the grave.\footnote{For the Tiv conception of the after-life, see Bohannan 1953: 81-83.}

The strongest trans-Saharan echoes here are not of more recent Judaeo-

Christian thought; but of the ancient Greek Hades and the ancient Judaic Sheol.

However, although such examples have to be taken into account in judging claims as to the importance of the quest for the ‘other world’, it must be admitted that they are in the minority. To give those who make these claims their due, we must look at some of the commoner conceptions of the after-life: conceptions which tend to be more positive.

The most widespread of these conceptions is that which provides the backing for all of those world-views in which ancestral forces are regarded as playing an important part in influencing the course of everyday life. In it, the ideal after-life is the one in which a man, having achieved high status as head of a large family or lineage, enjoys similar status in the after-life through the continued attention and deference of his living descendants. The most dreaded after-life, by corollary, is the one in which a man enters the world beyond the grave, either with no surviving descendants, or with descendants who have repudiated their ties with him at burial as the result of witchcraft or other supreme wickedness on his part. Here, then, the ideal situation is one of maximum continued contact with the world of the living, and the abhorred situation one of minimum contact.\footnote{The best description of an ancestral cult of this type that we have for sub-}
A second common conception, incompatible with the first to the eye of the outsider but often in fact combined with it, is that usually summed up in the term ‘reincarnation’. Where this conception reigns, we find that the ideal situation is one in which the spiritual portion of a good man returns to a worldly life even more satisfying and prestigious than the one he had previously lived. By corollary, a feared situation is one in which the spirit of a bad man comes back to a miserable human existence or even to an animal existence. Still more feared, in some communities, is the possibility of being prevented from any kind of return by ritual action taken at one’s funeral ceremony: a possibility which may be actualized if funeral divination reveals one is a witch or a sorcerer. Here, the ideal situation involves return to the world of the living on good or improved terms; whilst the worst possible situation involves being debarred from return.40

Whatever difficulties the scholar may experience in seeing how these two pictures of the after-life fit together, he will have no difficulty in seeing that they resemble each other in one key respect. Both, that is, portray continued fruitful involvement with the world of the living as the ideal, and cessation of such involvement as the ultimate horror. Both, moreover, differ in this respect not only from mainstream Christianity either Catholic or Protestant, but also from major Eastern religions.

The difference from the Christian conception, with its stress on an escape from an inferior temporal life to a superior eternal life, is obvious. The difference from Eastern conceptions is initially less obvious, because of the prominence in them of ideas of reincarnation. However, African and Eastern conceptions of reincarnation are poles apart. As we have seen, the African ideal tends to be one of endless return. By contrast, the Eastern ideal is one of successive returns which nonetheless progress toward and culminate in escape from ‘the wheel’. So, despite superficial differences from the Western conception of the after-life, the Eastern conception shares with it the ideal of ultimate escape from the temporal to the eternal (Metuh 1981: 153-154).

For the African religious thinker, then, it would seem to be true that the life in this world is the best there is. If anything is to come after it, this should, in one way or another, involve more of the same. Both the ideal of ancestorhood and the ideal of reincarnation presuppose this judgement. For Western Christian thinkers and their Hindu and

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40. There seems to be no in-depth modern study of reincarnation beliefs available. It is clear that such beliefs are by no means universal in the indigenous traditions of sub-Saharan Africa. Nonetheless, they seem fairly widespread in the forest areas of West Africa. And my own ideas about them have been largely formed by conversations with students, colleagues and friends of Igbo and Yoruba origin.
Buddhist counterparts, however, there is something fundamentally flawed about the worldly life; something that forces one to regard it as a way-stage on route to a condition utterly different and incomparably better. In short, as between the African conceptions and those closer to the hearts of the ‘Devout’, there is once again a great gulf set.

We have now completed our critical consideration of the picture of indigenous religious thought that results from application of the ‘Devout’ translation recipe. With respect to focal objects, to attitudes to these objects, and to the aims of the religious life, we have found that the picture diverges markedly from the realities of the situation. We must conclude that the consequences of pressing the recipe are disastrous.

2 - Further Explanation

In criticizing the ‘Devout’ approach to further explanation, I shall start with the prescription which ordains that the variable features of religious belief should be explained in terms of physiological, psychological and sociological theory, whilst the invariant theistic features should be explained in terms of the presence of the supreme being and of human awareness of this presence. As we have seen, this prescription, rather puzzling in itself, is grounded in two other propositions which are somewhat easier to understand. The first is that the variable features of belief represent the veil of error whilst the invariant theistic features represent the core of truth. The second is that erroneous belief is appropriately explained in terms of physiological, psychological and sociological theory, whilst true belief is appropriately explained in terms of the presence of the object and of human awareness of this presence.

For the moment, at least, I should like to avoid quarrelling with the first proposition. Arguments about the truth-values of specific religious statements can be both endless and very tricky. And I have no intention of getting sucked down into a quagmire that has swallowed up many better men. As for the alleged invariance of the theistic element, I shall, as the reader will expect from my earlier comments, have something more to say on this later. Meanwhile, I believe that it is the critique of the second proposition that will most readily resolve the question of the validity of the ‘Devout’ explanatory prescription.

For all its popularity and its hold over laymen and over scholars in several disciplines, the second proposition is remarkably lacking in rational support. Those who use it tend, if challenged, to say that it is self-evident. And if they go further than this, it is to cite everyday usage.\footnote{For the classic justification of this proposition in terms of everyday usage, see RYLE 1970: 301-311.}
Now, on the face of things, it does seem that, in the everyday life at least of modern Western culture, this proposition is by and large accepted. What are commonly regarded as veridical beliefs are normally not thought of as calling for any special explanation. And if those who hold them are challenged to provide such an explanation, they are liable to say something very minimal, such as: ‘Well, the world is like that and we have the normal human faculties for observing it.’ It is only when someone confesses to unusual beliefs which the community refuses to consider veridical that a more elaborate apparatus of physiological, psychological and sociological theory is brought in to provide an explanation. In this sense, everyday life does appear to provide the basis for a ‘paradigm case’ argument for the view that there is one pattern of explanation appropriate for valid beliefs and another appropriate for erroneous ones.

Like many other ‘paradigm case’ arguments, however, this one has little substance to it.

In the first place, even where physiological, psychological, sociological or combined theories are invoked to explain the genesis of erroneous beliefs or perceptual judgements, these are seldom purely and simply theories of error. They tend rather to be theories in which the mechanisms that produce veridical belief and perception are delineated in some detail, and in which erroneous belief and perception are explained in terms of factors interfering with these mechanisms. Even in the context of everyday life, then, physiological, psychological, sociological or combined explanations of erroneous belief and perception tend to be parasitic on physiological, psychological, sociological or combined theories of veridical belief and perception.

Secondly, we must remember that the patterns of explanation current in everyday life are shaped by the special interests of everyday life, and that other patterns of explanation may be legitimately called forth by other interests.

Let me elaborate on this last assertion.

The smooth running of everyday life in the modern West is based on two main assumptions: first, that the world around us is furnished with objects of certain kinds that behave in certain predictable ways; and second, that we share normal perceptual faculties that enable us to be aware of this furniture and arrive at a consensus of veridical belief about it. So long as the beliefs of those around us call neither of these assumptions into question, everyday life rolls on smoothly and without problems.

42 Typical here is the way in which neurologists account for a whole range of perceptual, credal and behavioural abnormalities in terms of prior injury to the head. In each case, the link between abnormality and prior injury is established, first by deploying a theory of the neural mechanisms underlying normal operation of the function in question, and then by showing how the injury interfered with these mechanisms.
This is why we don’t normally bother to produce explanations of beliefs commonly accepted as veridical, and why, if challenged to do so, we respond with very perfunctory ones. When someone comes up with odd beliefs about the world, however, the situation is radically changed. Such beliefs threaten the consensus on which the smooth running of everyday life is founded, and therefore evoke a much more careful and elaborate explanatory response.

Nonetheless, although everyday life is dominated by interests that require full-fledged explanations only of cognitive error, there are other situations where the interests in play demand full-fledged explanations of cognitive success. Nor are these situations confined to the ivory towers of the pure scientists. Some are governed by strongly practical interests. In the modern world, for example, there is an eminently practical interest in the possibility of constructing machines to take over some of man’s work of veridical perception and theory-construction. And for those whose thinking is governed by such an interest, it is a matter of vital import that they should eventually be able to say, in the kind of terms that would provide useful clues for the machine-makers, just how veridical perception and belief are achieved.43

In short, the insistence that full-fledged explanations in terms of physiological, psychological or sociological factors are appropriate only to erroneous beliefs turns out, under closer scrutiny, to be a product of the peculiar circumstances of everyday life and to have no necessary applicability beyond the range of these circumstances. The powerful sense of ‘rightness’ that it carries with it merely exemplifies the age-old (and often far from fruitful) influence of everyday patterns of thinking on all others.44

In so far, then, as the ‘Devout’ embargo on physiological, psychological or sociological explanations of what they regard as the veridical core of religious belief is based on a ‘paradigm case’ argument from the context of everyday life, it is groundless. And in the absence of any other rational argument in its favour, we can dismiss it.

Should this line of argument be generally accepted, we shall have succeeded in extirpating the obnoxious conviction that scholars of different personal religious views are for ever destined to pursue irreconcilable explanatory programmes in the field of religious phenomena. For, in its light, the theist can feel as free as the atheist to explore the potential of physiological, psychological or sociological theory in this field.

So much for the negative aspect of the ‘Devout’ approach to further explanation. What of the positive aspect? What of the special pattern

43. A prominent figure in this line of business is R. L. Gregory 1966.
44. For a review, critique and diagnosis of similar attempts to ban causal explanations of veridical beliefs in the sciences, see Bloor 1976: ch. 1-III.
of explanation that these scholars regard as uniquely theirs? What we have said so far may well have encouraged the reader to think of this 'special pattern' as little more than a poor relative of certain better-developed types of explanation. So far, however, we have not directly impugned its validity. Nonetheless, it too is more than ripe for our critical scrutiny.

Let me start by reminding the reader that this pattern of explanation depends on three premises: the first asserting the reality of supreme being with certain basic attributes; the second asserting the gift by this being to all men at all times and places of an awareness of him and a desire to commune with him; and the third asserting the similar gift of a limited but crucial ability to make veridical statements about him. Between them, these three premises offer rich temptations to metaphysical and methodological argument. Once again, however, I shall try to avoid getting sucked down into the quagmire of metaphysics. Millions of pages have been given over, down the years, to arguments both for and against the reality of a supreme being. And I have absolutely no pretension to being able to contribute anything new to this debate. I shall also try to avoid getting drawn into methodological discussions of the propriety of incorporating assumptions about the reality of the supreme being into explanations of religious phenomena. I see a danger here of coming up with just the sort of ultimately groundless a priori embargo that we found to be such a tiresome feature of the 'Devout' approach.

What I propose to do here is simply consider the 'Devout' explanatory scheme as constituting a theoretical hypothesis, featuring postulates about unobservables as well as observables, but none the worse for that. To appraise this hypothesis, I shall first set out what seems to me to be its most obvious deductive implication, and then go on to compare this implication with the realities of the situation.

The single most obvious and most important implication is, of course, that the world-views of all peoples at all times and places must feature as their focal object a supreme being with certain constant minimal attributes. Now unfortunately, as we began to see earlier in this paper, the realities of the situation in no way correspond with this implication. In sub-Saharan Africa, many of the indigenous world-views have indeed focussed on a supreme being. But the sheer variety of attributes imputed to this being in itself casts doubt on the claim that we are dealing here with a set of veridical responses to a single unchanging entity. Many such world-views, moreover, do not focus on a single supreme being. Many focus on a pair of such beings. And some have no place at all either for a single supreme being or for a pair of such beings.

If we go beyond Africa, the situation turns out to be no more encouraging. In the Far-Eastern homelands of Theravada Buddhism, we
find a world pullulating with lesser spirits, but with no trace of a central supreme being. And in the modern West, we find whole sub-cultures which seem to be moving steadily toward a non-spiritual view of the world and of man’s place in it.

The ‘Devout’ struggle desperately against these recalcitrant realities. As for the African data, they either ignore them stubbornly like so many anti-Galileans refusing to look down the telescope, or impugn the good faith of those who have gathered them or tried to draw attention to them. As for the Far-Eastern Theravada data, they never mention them. And as for the horrendous Western data, some have even gone as far as to try turning them upside down. Thus they maintain that Western man is not in fact an atheist, but someone whose technological prowess has made him so arrogant that he cannot tolerate the presence of a being incomparably greater than himself. Resenting such a being, he tries to fight him by denying him.

For the unbiased onlooker, these efforts must do more to draw attention to ‘Devout’ discomfort than to secure sympathy for the ‘Devout’ case. The steadfast ignoring of data speaks for itself. The impugning of good faith carries no conviction in the light of our knowledge of the backgrounds, characters and capabilities of those concerned. And redefinition of the Western atheist as secret theist must seem ludicrous to anyone with more than superficial knowledge of the contemporary West. To such a person, it will be all too clear that, even though there may be a few secret ‘fighters against God’ amongst the ranks of professed atheists, your average Western bearer of this metaphysical label is just what he says he is: a man for whom the idea of God has no place whatsoever in his view of the world, and in whom the idea excites no emotion either positive or negative.

Such antics in the face of the realities of the situation should in no way surprise us. For the head-on clash between these realities and the central deductive implication of the ‘Devout’ explanatory theory indicates that the latter is completely untenable.

With this conclusion, it has become clear that the ‘Devout’ have no more to offer us at the level of further explanation than they had at the level of translational understanding.

45. In this matter, Mbiti resembles the men who refuse to look down the telescope. Though he is certainly aware of the work of Wilson and P’Bluck (see Mbiti 1969, bibl.), he has apparently decided to ignore it. IDOWU (1967: 11-12; 1973: 61-62), by contrast, acknowledges the existence of reports of this kind, but tries to weaken their credibility by accusations of prejudice against their authors.

46. For this approach, see V. W. Turner 1962: 88-96. Turner makes powerful use of Herman Melville’s allegory of Captain Achab and the Great White Whale in portraying modern man’s fight with God.
Diagnosis

1 - Preliminaries

I should like to conclude this paper with some suggestions as to how the personal and social backgrounds of 'Devout' scholars may have contributed to the formation of their academic views.

Since the reader will by now be aware that I consider these views fundamentally misguided, he may feel inclined to complain that in taking on this task, I am perpetuating the very idea of the special appropriateness of psycho-social explanations to erroneous belief which I criticized earlier on. I should like to make it very clear, therefore, that this is far from my intention. Let me repeat the credo that psycho-social explanation is appropriate both to true and to erroneous beliefs, and add that, even had we been dealing in this paper with a marvellously insightful approach to African religions, I should still have felt it interesting and fruitful to offer suggestions as to the psychological and sociological factors that promoted these insights.

This said, however, it is nonetheless true that the particular problem we face here is that of how an approach so palpably inadequate to the phenomena at the levels, both of translational understanding and of further explanation can enjoy such rude health and such whole-hearted commitment from its advocates.

In what follows, I shall pay particular attention to two background factors that seem to me to have been powerful shapers of all of the various approaches made so far to the study of African religions. These are, first, the character and extent of the translational resources available to the scholar and, second, the character and magnitude of the ideological pressures upon him.

2 - Background Factors

(a) Translational Resources

As I pointed out at the beginning of this essay, translation of the language and thought of a particular African religion into terms of a language and thought currently enjoying 'world' status is the key to the first level of understanding in this field. As I also pointed out, it follows that the character of the translation recipe adopted does much to determine the overall character of a given approach.

Now, ideally, the character of the language and thought to be translated should be the sole constraint on choice of translation recipe. But this ideal could only be realized given one of two conditions. Either all the scholars concerned would have to have infinite capacities for fashion-
ing the appropriate translation recipes *ex nihilo*. Or all concerned would have to have an infinite diversity of ready-made translation instruments to draw upon.

In reality, of course, the character of the language and thought to be translated is far from being the sole constraint on choice of translation recipe: as witness the great variety of such recipes elicited by a particular area of 'alien' language and thought. And the main reason would seem to be that those involved in the translation enterprise *do not* have the ideal infinity of translational resources to draw upon. Rather, each one among them brings to the task such limited linguistic and conceptual resources as he has accumulated over the course of his education. For all that he bends, stretches, twists and recombines their elements, it is these limited resources that constitute his raw materials. Again, since each individual educational trajectory is different from every other, so the corresponding stock of raw materials differs from every other stock.

Clearly, the finitude and variability of translational resources rule out the very idea of a perfect translation. However, that does not mean that we should sit back and let anything go. For, with all the inevitability of imperfection, there is still the possibility of doing better or worse. And where this possibility exists, we have a duty to exploit it. This means, amongst other things, that we have a duty to try and isolate those variables that are the key to the quality of translation.

One of the most important of such variables is the richness/poverty of the scholar's translational resources. Given the character of the translation process as outlined in this paper, it follows that, the richer and more diverse the scholar’s translational resources, the better his chances of hitting on at least an approximately appropriate translation recipe, and conversely that, the less diverse his resources, the worse his chances of hitting on a good approximation. In this field, then, it would seem that, other things being equal, the universal polymath is the type with the best chances of success; whilst the person with the narrowly specialized education is the type with the worst chances.

Unfortunately, the specializing tendency of education in the modern Western or Westernized societies that produce interpreters of African religions is such that its typical scholarly product is the narrowly educated man who has the least chances of success. Most of the 'Devout', alas, fall into the latter category; and this, as we shall soon see, is one root of their failure.

As I said earlier, the 'Devout' translation recipe fails in three respects: first, in its emphasis on the centrality of the supreme being; secondly, in its emphasis on an attitude to this being of which the central component is the kind of fearful fascination appropriate to the 'mysterious', the 'inscrutable', the 'uncanny' or the 'praeternatural'; and, thirdly and perhaps most seriously, in its emphasis on communion rather than explanation/prediction/control as the leading motive of the religious
life. In what follows, I shall try to show how each of these failures stems from a limitation in translational resources.

The first failure is perhaps the most easily understood in these terms. For various reasons we haven’t the space to go into here, leaders of Christian thinking down the ages have almost obsessively stressed the ontological subordination of all other spiritual forces to the one God. And they have treated any challenge to this line of thought as a severe threat to the survival of Christian religion. In the process, they have succeeded in imposing a type of religious discourse which renders its user incapable of thinking of lesser spiritual forces as having a reality and life of their own. In this respect alone, the ‘Devout’ are hampered from the start in their attempts to provide an adequate translational understanding of most African religions.

In order to understand the second and third failures, we have to turn to another aspect of the history of Christianity: to the fact that, over the centuries, the faith has been periodically embattled with other systems of thought and ways of life, and bears the marks of these battles.

One such mark is that left by Christianity’s own most cherished defensive tactic. Faced with challenges to the rationality of their faith, Christian thinkers have tended, very characteristically, to take refuge in aggressive obscurantism rather than in rational counter-argument, proudly vaunting the unamenability of the object of their faith to rational comprehension. They became notorious for this tactic in their early battles with Mediterranean paganisms. And they have dusted it down and brought it into action again in their more recent battles with science-inspired atheism. Someone looking at these battles from the sidelines may well be reminded of that elusive but hardy mollusc, the cuttlefish, who, when faced with superior muscle-power, retreats behind a formidable jet of opaque ink! Here, I suggest, we have the origin of that positive celebration of ‘mystery’ and ‘inscrutability’ which looms so large in the ‘Devout’ vision of the religious life. In African systems of religious thought, which have not been embattled in the same way and so have not been under the same pressure to evolve defences against rival systems, it is not surprising that such positive celebration is absent. In their determination to see it where it is not, the ‘Devout’ appear once again to be victims of the historically determined peculiarities of their translational resources.

To further our comprehension of the last two failures, let us look more closely at the mark left on Christianity by its confrontation with science-inspired atheism.

47. For their bad reputation in this respect with leaders of other faiths, see Dodds 1965: 106, 120-122.
48. One could fairly give the prize for intellectual obscurantism in the modern West to theologians such as Otto, Barth, Bultmann and Tillich!
Four centuries ago, Western Christian discourse was shaped by the pursuit, both of explanation/prediction/control, and of communion. A good illustration of such dual shaping can be seen in the thought of those cosmologists who saw their theories, on the one hand as means of explaining the world, and on the other as means of giving praise to the Creator.49 As time passed, however, the advent of a succession of ever-more-powerful theories couched in non-spiritual terms put the leaders of Christian religious thought on the defensive. Faced with the alternatives of continuing the unequal competition in the realm of explanation/prediction/control and of dropping out of the competition by a restrictive redefinition of the aims of the religious life, they tended increasingly to opt for the latter.

Some were reluctant to go the whole way in this. Whilst consigning the vast majority of worldly phenomena to the intellectual care of the scientists, they cherished the notion that there were certain kinds of phenomena that were impervious to scientific explanation and were direct manifestations of spiritual action. Others went the whole hog and consigned explanation/prediction/control of all worldly events to the scientists.

Those who took the first course came as a result to associate the spiritual with that which defied the ‘natural’ order of things. Hence the vogue of the terms ‘supernatural’ and ‘praeternatural’ as labels for the spiritual realm. This association further encouraged definitions of religion which emphasized the ‘mysteriousness’ and ‘inscrutability’ of the object of faith, and the attitude of fearful fascination appropriate to an object with such attributes.

Once again, this is a development with no parallel in African religious thought. In so far as the latter provides a framework of explanatory concepts that embraces all worldly phenomena, it has no place for a dichotomy corresponding to that between the ‘natural’ and the ‘supernatural’, and no place for special attitudes associated with that which defies the ‘natural’ order of things. Here, then, we see yet another way in which the historically determined peculiarities of ‘Devout’ translational resources constitute an obstacle to proper translational understanding.

Whether Western religious thinkers went most of the way or all of it in their concessions to the scientists, however, the result was in many

49. The following passage from Kepler (in HEISENBERG 1952: 78) provides a good illustration: ‘I have endeavoured to gain for human reason, aided by geometrical calculation, an insight into His way of creation; may the creator of the heavens themselves, the father of all reason, to whom our mortal senses owe their existence; may He who is himself immortal . . . keep me in His grace and guard me from reporting anything about His work which cannot be justified before His magnificence or which may misguide our powers of reason, and may He cause us to aspire to the perfection of His works of creation by the dedication of our lives. . .’
respects the same. Gradually, a division of labour became established, whereby scientists pursued the ends of explanation, prediction and control, whilst religious thinkers pursued the end of communion with God. With the two sets of ends now by and large pursued by two different groups of specialists, two distinct types of discourse came to replace the original unity. And once these types were established, the specializing tendency of the educational apparatus ensured that, all too often, people well versed in one of them tended to be ill-versed in the other.

The present-day ‘Devout’ scholar merely exemplifies this general trend. Well versed in discourse shaped by the aim of communion with the spiritual, he is almost always correspondingly ill-versed in discourse shaped by the aims of explanation, prediction and control. In many other walks of life, this limitation would have been no great disadvantage. In his chosen walk, however, it is crippling. For it means that he has only one part of the total resources necessary for the development of a proper translational understanding of African religious thought, and the less important part at that.

Let us sum up our findings in this section. It has become clear that one root of all three ‘Devout’ failures at the level of translational understanding is inappropriateness or inadequacy of translational resources. Indeed, it would seem that a peculiar concatenation of historical and personal circumstances has landed the ‘Devout’ with translational equipment quite unequal to the enterprise to which they have committed themselves.

(b) Ideological Pressures

Ideology has been defined as ideas in the service of a wish or commitment. And, without prejudice to anything said above about translational resources, I submit that some of the worst distortions in the ‘Devout’ view can be further understood when we see this view as an ideology whose holders are above all else preoccupied with defending strong egalitarian commitment against certain deeply inegalitarian implications of their own Christian faith.

Most modern Christians, of course, contend that their religion is egalitarian in its very essence. And they carry a great deal of conviction in so arguing. Certainly, ‘All men are equal in the sight of God’ is a very basic Christian tenet. Nonetheless, the same Christians tend to be uncomfortable when faced with questions about the standing of non-Christians in the sight of God. For despite sophisticated modern theological casuistry on the subject, the problem of how Christians should view those of their fellow men who live and die as non-Christians has yet to be resolved. In the minds of most Christian thinkers, the idea still persists that genuine Christians are ‘redeemed’ whilst non-Christians are ‘unre-
deemed'. And to such thinkers, there is a sense in which 'redeemed' means 'first-class citizen of the universe' whilst 'unredeemed' means 'second-class citizen of the universe'. At the heart of Christianity, then, there is a conflict between its egalitarian aspects and some definitely non-egalitarian implications.

For the 'Devout' scholar engaged in the study of African religions, I see this conflict as creating an agonizing dilemma. Typically, such a scholar, be he African or Western, has a strong egalitarian commitment. More specifically, reacting to aspersions cast on the African by several generations of anthropologists in the 19th and early 20th centuries, he is committed to demonstrating equality of mental and cultural capacity as between the African and his Western counterpart. In this commitment, his Christian faith provides him with broad overall backing. In the matter of the adherents of African religions, however, Christianity threatens to let him down. For, insofar as these religions are non-Christian, their members are 'unredeemed' and so in a sense 'second-class citizens'. In short, the 'Devout' scholar's own faith threatens to push him back to just the sort of inegalitarian position that he is committed to resisting with every fibre of his being.

It is in terms of this predicament, I suggest, that we can make further sense of many 'Devout' errors.

Let us look first at its impact at the level of translational understanding. If the 'Devout' scholar provides a translation scheme which points to radical discontinuity between the African religion he is trying to understand and his own Christian faith, he thereby admits the 'unredeemed' character of the adherents of this religion, and reverts to a form of inegalitarianism. However, if he produces a scheme which points to a measure of continuity between the African religion and Christianity, he can assure himself that the adherents of this religion are in some sense 'redeemed', and so keep his feet out of the inegalitarian trap. Not surprisingly, our scholar takes the second option.

Let us turn now to the impact of the 'Devout' predicament at the level of further explanation. The important thing to notice here is the insistence, in the 'Devout' explanatory framework, not just on the existence of God, but also on his self-revelation to all peoples at all times and places. For although these explanatory premises do not amount to a profession of faith in a universal self-revelation of a specifically Christian kind, they can be taken as asserting a universal self-revelation of the God of the Christians. And the acceptance of such an assertion does surely allow all but the most narrow-minded Christians to regard their fellow men at all times and places as in some sense 'redeemed' and so as in some sense 'first-class citizens'. No wonder, then, that the two premises play such a key part in 'Devout' explanatory activities.

Evidence for the aptness of this diagnosis emerges directly from the work of some of the leading 'Devout' authors.
One such author is Gaba, who ends one of his rather strained demonstrations of continuities between African and Christian concepts with the obviously relieved conclusion that the discovery of such continuities may absolve the Christian scholar or missionary from having to treat his non-Christian countrymen as ‘eternally damned’. 50

Another such author is Idowu, who spends much space reviling 19th-century Western belittlers of the African, and denounces more recent assertions of discontinuity between African and Christian concepts of a supreme being as extensions of the same tradition. For Idowu, such assertions imply that the one God has not revealed himself to Africans, and are therefore tantamount to the condemnation of Africans as ‘scum’. Accordingly, it is only through their disproof that we can pave the way for a restoration of the dignity and worth of Africans in the eyes of the world. 51

50 ‘One easily discovers striking similarities which provide useful points of contact for presenting one’s message. But it is precisely these points of contact which make an agent in the Christianization process ponder seriously on the whole missiological and evangelical enterprise; whether in the light of his present knowledge of the religion of those he is to Christianize, dialogue rather than impatient attempt to convert his hearers should not be his guiding principle, and whether it is still right for him to consider all those who want to remain in their own religious persuasions as eternally damned’ (GABA 1978: 400).

51 The following passages convey both Idowu’s basic ideological stance and the intensity of feeling behind it:

‘The question at issue [. . .] is briefly this. “Do primitive peoples have any concept or knowledge of God?” And since that question can no longer be answered in the negative, how do we answer the supporting question of “What or which God, their own God or the real God?” The heresy began precisely at the point where the question was answered explicitly or implicitly unequivocally, that it must be their own God, that is, a god other than the supreme God as known in the personal experiences, theology or religio-cultural conception of the Western world. The mind of the Western scholar, or investigator, or still more to the point, theorist, has played a trick on him: he has rejected on the ground of prejudice and emotional resistance to truth the fact that the same God who is Lord of the universe is the one whose revelation is apprehended universally and therefore by the “primitive peoples” in their own way, and he immediately falls, consequently, into the trap of making God in his own image by thinking that, “I look down upon these peoples as an offensive scum of humanity; it follows, therefore, that the God whom I worship, or, at least, who is regarded as the God of my glorious and incomparable culture, must be of the same mind as I—He can have no time for an excrescence of their kind”.

‘Thus, the world has been treated to meaningless terms like “the high gods of primitive peoples” or “wherever you go among these people, there is a supreme god”. It would seem that the authors of this heresy have been so absorbed in the task of proving the difference between “their own God” and “the high gods of primitive peoples” that they have failed to see the glaring conclusion of their own premise, i.e. an artificial supreme god for each nation and a consequent artificial, universal polytheism. The reason for the racial confusion and injustice and unrelieved suffering throughout the world today is that there is a plurality of imagined, racially egocentric gods who are independent of one another and each of whom is seeking at the earliest opportunity to champion the cause of his own racial proteges in undoing other gods and their proteges’ (IDOWU 1973: 61-62).

‘Finally, in order to understand the basis of African Traditional Religion,
It is not surprising that the clearest indications of the ideological character of the 'Devout' position should come from African rather than Western scholars. After all, it is their non-Christian kith and kin whose status is at stake. Nonetheless, similar overtones can also be heard in the works of their Western counterparts. From H. W. Turner's latest manifesto (1981: 3-4, 13-14), for instance, it is clear that there is a strong link in the author's mind between establishing that African religions show the essential characteristics of True Religion and establishing the human worth and dignity of Africans.

To those of us who share the 'Devout' egalitarian commitment but not the 'Devout' religious faith, all of this is apt to sound like a case of much ado about nothing. For we, mercifully, feel no need to dress our atheistic or polytheistic relatives and friends in Judaeo-Christian clothes before we can accept them as first-class citizens of the universe. Indeed, asked to nominate a dozen people for such first-class status, some of us might be inclined to turn to those of our nearest and dearest who are atheists or polytheists before ever we turned to a monotheist or more specifically to a Christian! We find it difficult even to imagine, let alone to empathize with, the kind of heart-searching to which the 'Devout' are prone. For the 'Devout' scholar who is sincere in his Christianity, however, such heart-searching is all too real. And we must make an effort to empathize with it if we are to begin the sort of dialogue that might eventually lead him into more fruitful paths.

The scholar must divest his mind of the obnoxious notion of a High God. As I have said repeatedly, this comes out of the refusal -- deliberate refusal -- on the part of foreign investigators to accept that Africans are as much entitled to a place with the Supreme God as they are... Africa recognizes only one God, the Supreme, Universal God. Even though she has pictures of Him which are of various shades, calls Him by various names and approaches Him in various ways, He nevertheless remains one and the same God, the Creator of all the end of the earth. Man's problems personal, domestic, social, political, relational, national, and international... will never be really solved until he has learnt to think of one God and one universe, and of his fellowmen as persons with identical basic values and spiritual urges like himself (Idowu 1967: 11-12).

Several Nigerian friends have said to me that what they find most painful and difficult in Christian commitment is the idea that they, as Christians, may be saved, but that some of their most beloved relatives and friends, still non-Christians, may be damned.

I cannot help thinking that Christian theologians have not really stretched themselves as far as they might have done in the matter of those who hold definitely non-theistic beliefs. There seems to have been concentration on the theological upgrading of members of other 'Great World Religions'. (The latter is a theologian's phrase for religions which have very large numbers of adherents and a theistic focus which can plausibly be represented as showing continuities with the Christian God.) This has left radical polytheists and atheists 'unredeemed', has perpetuated anxiety among Christian students of these other outlooks, and has encouraged continued distortion of their content in the effort to bring their adherents 'into the fold'. It seems to me that if the theologians had devoted the amount of energy and ingenuity to the problem of polytheists and atheists that they have devoted to the problem of evil, we
The Way Forward

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, a leading spokesman for the 'Devout' approach (H. W. Turner 1981) recently maintained that the only way forward in our area of common concern was through the further cultivation of this approach. From what has been said in this paper, however, it should be clear that this is disastrous counsel which can only lead to the compounding of already gross errors. Further advance will require a radically different approach.

In throwing out a few suggestions as to what direction we should be taking, let me follow once more the overall plan of this essay, and talk in terms of two stages of interpretation: translational understanding and further explanation.

With respect to the search for an appropriate translation recipe, I should like to make two suggestions. First of all, we should draw on a more 'demotic' strand of the Western heritage of religious discourse, one that allows reference to a wide diversity of spiritual forces without automatically reducing such forces to manifestations of a single supreme being. Second, whilst retaining elements of modern Western religious discourse in our tool-kit, we should bring in alongside them elements of the theoretical discourse that is now the monopoly of the sciences, elements which were once combined with their religious counterparts but which have now become separated. Only by use of elements from both areas of discourse can we do justice to the fact that, in the religious life of most African societies, the concern for communion with the spiritual is accompanied, indeed overshadowed, by the concern for explanation, prediction and control of worldly events. Initial efforts indicate that the task of re-amalgamating these separated elements in order to forge an effective translation instrument is likely to prove extremely difficult.

And at this early stage of the enterprise, I don’t think any general guidelines can be given. However, for a clue as to what the results of such a re-amalgamation might look like, perhaps we should turn to the conceptual apparatus of Freud, which a sympathetic commentator recently described as at once 'animistic' and 'scientific' (Rieff 1965: 22). And for attempts to use elements of the Freudian apparatus as a starting point for the creation of an effective instrument for the translational understanding of African religious systems, I would ask the reader to

should by now be relieved of the agonized contortions performed by some of our Christian colleagues in the study of African religions. Perhaps they might consider as a starting point the statement which the novelist Morris West (1984: 316) puts into the mouth of a Mother Superior faced with the request that she allow the burial in her convent cemetery of an unbeliever who has worked for her order: 'Gianni, my boy, it doesn’t matter what we believe about God. It's what He knows about us. Your Magda will be very welcome here.'
look at the essays by Fortes and myself in the recent re-issue of Fortes’ *Oedipus and Job in West African Religion* (1983).

In our search for an appropriate scheme of further explanation, I suggest that we should again be guided by what we know of the primacy in African religious life of explanation/prediction/control over communion. Looking at African religions as systems of theory-in-practice, we may turn for inspiration to the spate of work on technological, economic, social and political determinants of theoretical beliefs that has appeared in recent years in the wake of the philosophical ‘discovery’ of the underdetermination of theory by evidence. At the same time, however, we should remember that, to those who believe in them, spiritual forces are people with whom one is involved in social relations. And in order to do justice to this aspect of our field of study, we may have to seek inspiration from the various psychologies of interpersonal relations.

If anyone should complain that these suggestions seem to be taking us far, far away from anything resembling the familiar programmatic nostrums of the ‘Devout’, I can only reply ‘The further the better’!

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