



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

African Religions: Symbol, Ritual, and Community by Benjamin C. Ray
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variance in achievement compared to family variables, they account for more of the variance in the achievement of children from disadvantaged rather than advantaged homes. Disadvantaged children, if they learn academic material at all, learn it at school. The same may be true for younger generation Jews who come from homes that are much less steeped in Jewish life than their fathers' homes. What ever the explanation, to find that religious schools have a moderate impact on adult religio-ethnic identification is a noteworthy contrast to what we read about the impact of Catholic and Lutheran schools.

The impact of having an older brother has some importance for the younger generation but none for the older generation. The authors really do not know

how to explain this variable, nor do I. However, I agree with them that its impact, at least in the younger generation, is noteworthy.

The positive aspects of this study, then, lie in the interesting comparisons that can be made between different agents of socialization and their relative impact on two different generations. But, unfortunately, because of the way the data are analyzed, the study is more interesting for what it suggests than for what it shows.

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A ray of hope for the study of African religions

AFRICAN RELIGIONS: SYMBOL, RITUAL, AND COMMUNITY. By Benjamin C. Ray. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976. 238 pp. \$8.95 (cloth), \$4.95 (paper).

In most cases to date, general works on African religions have been marred either by insufficient consideration of the problems involved in translating the conceptions of one culture into another, or by inadequate appreciation of the social context of religious thought and action, or by special theological pleadings. Often, more than one of these faults applies. Benjamin Ray, however, has brought us a work to be taken seriously by all students of African religions.

Ray brings an impressive array of credentials to the task: a degree in the History of Religion from the University of Chicago, training in anthropology at Oxford University, and an impressive background in philosophical analysis. Moreover, he is one of the few commentators on general problems of African religions with actual fieldwork experience in an African society. Probably no other young scholar is as well prepared for this work.

To a large degree, Ray's book succeeds. He offers the reader a clear idea of the structure of African religious thought, the problems to which thought and ritual are oriented, and the degree and way in which African religions both differ and resemble religious thought and action in Western societies. His framework is a modified and less polemical version of Clifford Geertz's analytical apparatus. He defines religion in terms of three aspects: archetypal symbols, ritual, and community. Archetypal symbols are sacred images whose analysis as a system provides the structure in terms of which experience is interpreted. Ritual is a means of ordering and controlling experience, particularly as defined in terms of archetypal symbols. Community defines the audience or congregation in terms of which and for whom the archetypal symbols and rituals are operative.

The framework is an excellent one for two reasons. First, it allows Ray to combine results obtained from phenomenological, sociological, and historical approaches. Thus he is able to see such different works as Middleton's *Lugbara Religion* and Griaule's *Conversations With Ogotemeli* as dealing with different aspects of African religions rather than with radically different religious systems. This leaves open the question of how these two systems *do* differ from each other. Ray wisely refrains from answering. However, his "polymethodic approach," as he calls it, clearly indicates the way we have to go before valid comparison of differences can be made. We must know more about the Lugbara from Griaule's point of view and more about the Dogon from Middleton's point of view. Thus Ray's book illustrates one reason we are unable to make assertions about the content of African religions: by and large, comparable data do not exist for a wide variety of religious systems.

The second merit of Ray's approach is its revelation of some structural features that many African religions do have in common. Three of the most interesting conclusions may help illustrate. First, following Robin Horton, Ray agrees that there is a hierarchy of mystical entities in African religions through which experience is interpreted. Causes of misfortune, which African religions seem designed to explain, can be attributed to a variety of different supernatural entities. Hence, in some societies disagreement about the specific cause for any given event may be rife. This allows religious ideas to function as an idiom for conflict and competition.

Second, Ray concludes that African religious systems operate situationally. A full understanding of them can be obtained only through a discovery of which sort of events bring religious ideas and forms of action into play. In Africa, religion operates during times and under circumstances of misfortune. Hence, research that separates religion from context provides a very false impression of

both the meaning and the coherency of religious thought and action.

Third, Ray asserts that a contextual examination of religious thought and action indicates that in most African systems of thought there is no conception of mind. In contrast to Western thought, the self is not viewed as the repository of experience. Ray is not here teetering on the edge of a resuscitation of a prelogical mentality. Rather, he wants to indicate that the causes of events are viewed as external and not as the result of the individual's internal organization of experience. For example, Ray points out that a series of personal mishaps might be attributed to the wrath of ancestors or to the action of witches, but it would never be attributed to the action of an accident-prone personality, as we might do.

Ray's book is full of interesting propositions. It is therefore poignant that Professor Ray has failed to provide answers to two important and related questions. These are: What is there about African religions that is African rather than, say, also Melanesian or American Indian? And, to what extent have other religious traditions introduced into Africa become Africanized? I do not think that Professor Ray can really be faulted for failing to answer these questions. Answers would derive from an assumption that one can really write something intelligible and valid about the content of African religions, about what is uniquely African about

them. However, there may be more similarities between the Trobriands and the Nuer than between a West African and an East African people. Thus, this reviewer concludes that what African societies share in common is a colonial experience, and not a common fund of ideas. The structural features that they share with each other, they also share with other, non-African societies. While this conclusion suggests that Ray has set himself an impossible task, for he has entitled his book *African Religions* rather than *Religions in Africa*, it does nothing to diminish the merits of this excellent book.

Ray's work is the best organized account of the African material that exists. Further it is a must for all students of what might be called the "little traditions." Ray has identified features of religions of a certain type. The next step is to examine non-African religious traditions for whether the same features also obtain. In sum, this excellent and simply written little book is highly recommended: not for what it tells us about African religions, but for what it tells us about religions in Africa and in other parts of the world. Finally, the book has an excellent bibliography and, rare, a filmography.

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Ambitious effort deserves attention

NEW HEAVEN, NEW EARTH: A STUDY OF MILLENARIAN ACTIVITIES. By Kenelm Burridge. New York: Schocken Books, 1975. 191 pp. \$6.50.

The modest sub-title of this compact book—"a study of millenarian activities"—falls far short of signalling its scope. For it is, in fact, an ambitious attempt not merely to describe or classify the salient features of the dozen or so examples of what the author identifies as "millenarian" movements but to redefine "religion" in a way that forces the reader to rethink the entire process through which social relations are restructured, new values defined, power redistributed, religion recreated.

Redistribution of power (and, perforce, of resources of various kinds) is crucial. Burridge proposes at the outset that "all religions are basically concerned with power" (p. 5). "Religion and religious activity," he says, should be thought of as "the redemptive process indicated by the activities, moral rules, and assumptions about power which, pertinent to the moral order and taken on faith, not only enable a people to perceive the truth of things, but guarantee that they are indeed perceiving the truth of things" (pp. 6-7).

Explicitly rejecting the idea (of E. B. Taylor, as well as of several contemporary social scientists)

that religion is "simply a belief in spiritual beings," Burridge nevertheless stresses that religion is to be defined as a "redemptive process" (comparable to the way Bryan Wilson, in *Magic and the Millennium*, identifies concern for personal and/or collective "salvation" as an essential ingredient). In this sense, the study of religion or of religious phenomena, including millenarian movements, can never neglect the subjective perceptions of the phenomena held by their adherents.

Suggesting that "every millenarian movement comes to us as a story, as a narrative of historical or quasi-historical events," the author draws some of the data on which he rests his theses from movements as varied as the Huahua movement among the Maori of New Zealand (1862), "nativistic" movements among the Plains Indians of North America, the Oraons and Paharia (two non-Hindu groups in northeast India), the Tuka movement in Melanesia (1885), and several more recent examples. There are teasingly provocative references to "the activities associated with Gautama Buddha, Mahavira, . . . Ghengis Khan, Tamerlane . . ." as *millenarian* (p. 33). Mahavira and the Jains are considered in a later chapter, and so, briefly, is Gautama, but, armed with the author's model, the reader is left to make his own applications and tests of the theory.