



The Problem of Belief: Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner on 'The Inner Life'

Author(s): Matthew Engelke

Source: *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 18, No. 6 (Dec., 2002), pp. 3-8

Published by: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3695178>

Accessed: 16/06/2009 08:47

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=rai>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Anthropology Today*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The problem of belief

Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner on 'the inner life'

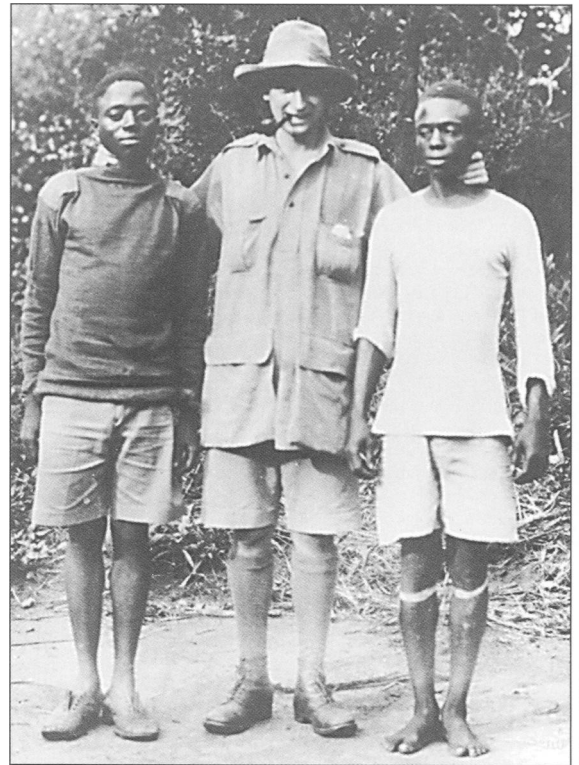
MATTHEW ENGELKE

Matthew Engelke is Lecturer in anthropology at the London School of Economics. His major research interests include religion in Africa, the history of anthropology, and human rights theory. He is also editor of *The Prickly* Paradigm Press. His email is m.engelke@lse.ac.uk

Between 1993 and 1999 I spent 17 months in Zimbabwe studying the Johane Masowe Church, an African religious movement with roots in the Makoni District stretching back to the early 1930s. Like most other African independent churches, the Masowe Church lays great stress on spiritual healing, the eradication of witchcraft, and possession by the Holy Spirit (see Sundkler 1961, Comaroff 1985, Hoehler-Fatton 1996, Muller 1999). During the course of my fieldwork there were a number of instances in which these 'other-worldly' activities forced me to think about the connection between fieldwork methods and religious beliefs.

As for any anthropologist, questions about how I was conducting research as a participant-observer and whether or not I was coming up with fruitful results provided a constant source of worry. The religious practices of the Masowe seemed to throw up a particularly nasty epistemological hurdle in this regard. I found it difficult, for instance, to understand what was 'happening' when I saw church prophets fight witchcraft by exorcising evil spirits from possessed congregants, as I did several times a week, and how, exactly, I should position myself at such moments. I would wonder if I could only comprehend these phenomena if I shared, in some sense, a belief in the supernatural. This is, of course, an age-old question for anthropologists of religion, and raises something I will call 'the problem of belief'.

Fig. 1. Evans-Pritchard in the field, in a somewhat awkward pose, with two unnamed informants.



RAI no 35963

The problem of belief

Belief – to say nothing of religion – is a thorny concept, in part, as Katherine Ewing (1994) suggests, because it can collapse the distance between the anthropologist and the people he or she studies.¹ If an anthropologist holds the same religious beliefs as 'the natives' – or even, some might say, any at all – the implicit concern of the discipline is that he or she might be surrendering too much anthropological authority. But if there is no attempt to understand the native's point of view, the anthropologist will have failed as a researcher. Ethnographers must strike a balance of being 'inside' and 'outside' in order to find an appropriate tone; to paraphrase Geertz (1976:223), someone who studies witchcraft should sound neither like a witch nor like a geometer. In dealing with this quandary, most anthropologists accordingly treat religious belief as an ethnographic concern, because it helps them maintain 'professional' distance. But as Ewing argues, belief remains an 'embarrassing possibility' that stems from 'a refusal to acknowledge that the subjects of one's research might actually know something about the human condition that is personally valid for the anthropologist' (1994:571; see also Harding 1987). The problem of belief, then, is the problem of remaining at the proper remove from 'natives' inner lives' (Geertz 1976:236).

Durkheim's discussions of belief in *The elementary forms of the religious life* still shape enquiries in the anthropology of religion. These discussions have lent comfort and support to those of us who do, in fact, find belief a problem in the way I have defined it here. Durkheim defined religious beliefs as 'states of opinion [that] consist in representations' (1965:15). In doing so, he reinforced his classic model of the relationship between the individual and the collective in social organization. 'For the collective force', he wrote, 'is not entirely outside of us; it does not act upon us wholly from without; but

rather, since society cannot exist except in and through individual consciousness, this force must also penetrate us and organize itself within us' (1965:240). For many anthropologists who study religion, this is precisely why belief is problematic. Belief is a subjective, and therefore personal, experience. But subjectivity makes understanding religion as simply a 'social fact' difficult.

In his recent study of witchcraft in Soweto, Adam Ashforth (2000) deals with the problem of belief at length. Ashforth does not engage the scholarly literature directly; instead, his work takes a more prosaic approach. Ashforth's book is a portrait of his friend Madumo, a young Sowetan man who claims to have been bewitched by his family. Madumo suffers from poor health, he has no job, and, by the time Ashforth finds him on one visit to South Africa, he has managed to alienate almost everyone who ever cared for him. In the process of trying to cure these witchcraft-induced ills, Madumo submits to the strict regime of a witch doctor's medicine and to the spiritual counsel of a Zionist prophet, with the aim of escaping and ejecting the evil spirits and creatures that plague him.

Ashforth's narrative does not read like most social scientific work on witchcraft (it has the feel of a novel) and perhaps because of this he is able to capture the complexities and ambiguities of what it means to believe in the supernatural in a way that many anthropological accounts cannot. Ashforth states quite bluntly that he himself does not believe in 'invisible forces or beings that shape the lives and destinies of the living' (2000:249). But neither does he claim that they do not exist – exist, that is, as physical manifestations. Rather he says, 'the secrecy of witchcraft can never be penetrated' (2000:254). In this instance and others (e.g. Favret-Saada 1980, Stoller and Olkes 1987, E. Turner et al. 1992), the problem of belief is raised and left open, and the ethnography, I think, is richer for it.²

Fig. 2. Evans-Pritchard in the field. (AT welcomes comments from readers who know more about this photo. Ed.).

A shorter version of this paper was presented at the American Anthropological Association's Annual Meeting in Washington, DC, 28 November 2001. I would like to thank Erica Bornstein for organizing the panel, as well as Bella Mukonyora and Carol Ann Muller for their comments both during and after the session. I would also like to thank Rebecca Nash, Matt Tomlinson and the three anonymous reviewers for ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY for their very helpful suggestions. Some of the research on Victor Turner presented here was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the Raven Society at the University of Virginia.

1. Malcolm Ruel has also discussed belief at length, and has raised the provocative point – to which I shall return – that it is a largely Christian concern, a concept that 'is [not] central to all religions in the same way as it is to Christianity' (1997:57).

2. Benjamin Ray (2000) offers a similar discussion of these issues in the work of Paul Stoller and Edith Turner.

3. Further analysis of Evans-Pritchard and Turner's work might well ask if there is any necessary correlation between their conversions and their approaches to the 'inner life'.

Ashforth, Adam 2000.

Madumo: A man bewitched. University of Chicago Press.

Babcock, Barbara & John MacAloon 1987. Victor W. Turner (1920-1983).

Semiotica, 65(1/2):1-27.

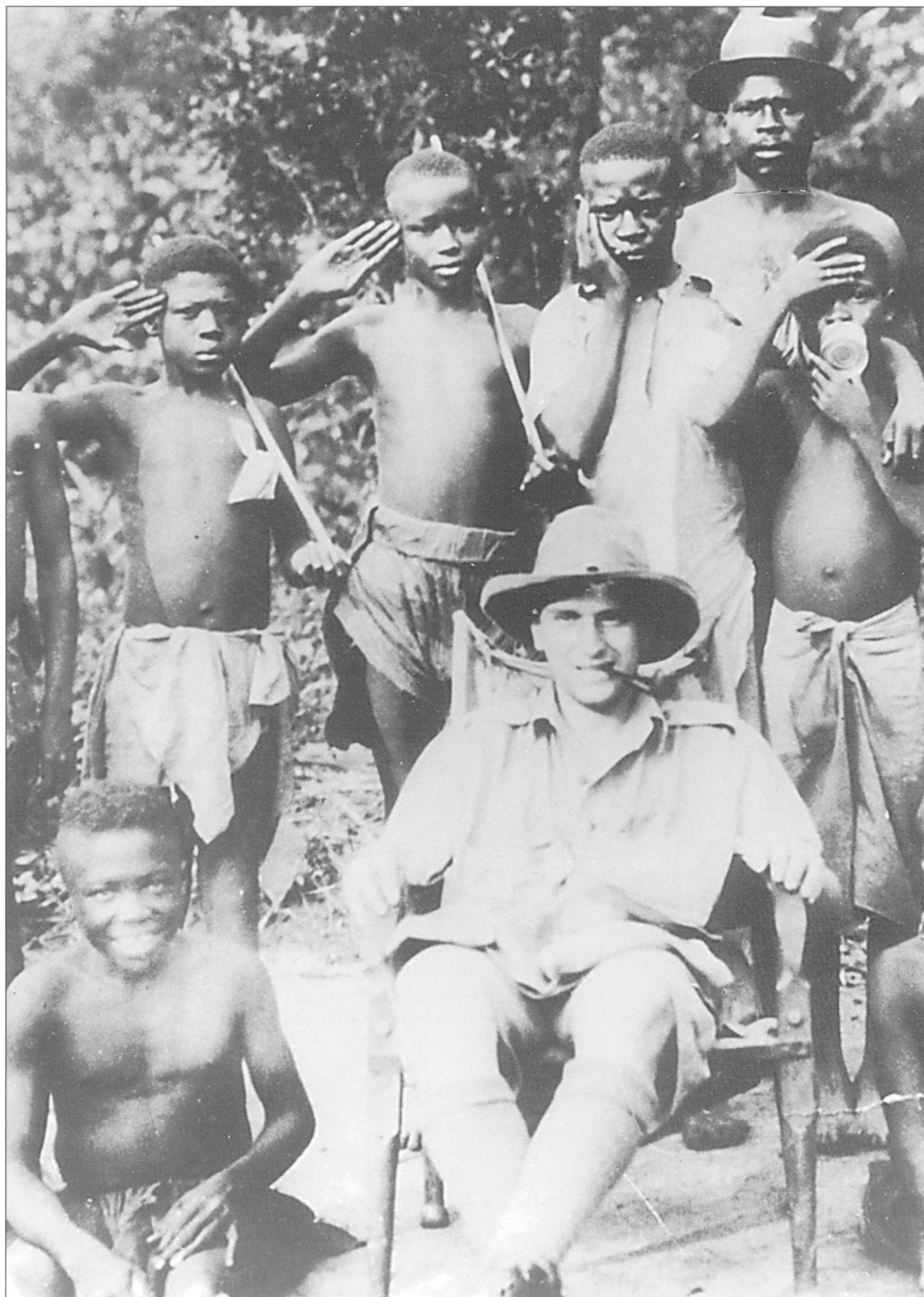
Barnes, J.A. 1987. Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, 1902-1973. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 73:447-490.

Beidelman, T.O. 1991. E.E. Evans-Pritchard. In C. Winters (ed.) *International dictionary of anthropologists*, pp.185-187. New York: Garland.

Bloch, Maurice 1986. *From blessing to violence: History and ideology in the circumcision ritual of the Merina of Madagascar*. Cambridge University Press.

Comaroff, Jean 1985. *Body of power, spirit of resistance: The culture and history of a South African people*. University of Chicago Press.

Douglas, Mary 1980. *Evans-Pritchard*. Brighton: Harvester Press.



I would like to address this problematic from a slightly different angle by focusing on the methods of E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner. Both Evans-Pritchard and Turner are central figures in the anthropology of religion. Evans-Pritchard's concern with the 'rationality' of belief in Zande witchcraft and the Nuer concept of *kwoth* is of course well known, as is Turner's work, with his wife Edith, on religious symbolism in their interpretations of Ndembu ritual and Christian pilgrimage. When it comes to the problem of belief, however, I do not think their works have received the attention they deserve. I have no intention of resolving the problem in this paper; when discussing methods, I am not sure anthropologists can resolve anything at all. Nor will I address the problem

from a theological standpoint (as both Evans-Pritchard and Turner did, albeit in a somewhat roundabout manner). My aim here is to add some grist to the mill for anthropologists studying religion as they reflect on method when reading in the history of the discipline. In doing so, I would like to suggest how Evans-Pritchard and Turner worked against what Ewing calls the 'reductive atheism' (1994:572) that often characterizes the main currents in the anthropology of religion influenced by Durkheim. Each had strong religious convictions themselves (both were converts to Catholicism), and each tried to fold their 'inner lives' into the work of their anthropology. For Evans-Pritchard and Turner belief became an element of method.

- Durkheim, Emile 1965. *The elementary forms of the religious life* (trans.) J.W. Swain. New York: Free Press.
- Engelke, Matthew 2000. An interview with Edith Turner. *Current Anthropology*, 41(5):843-52.
- (forthcoming). 'The endless conversation : Fieldwork, writing, and the marriage of Victor and Edith Turner. In R. Handler (ed.) *Significant others: Interpersonal and professional commitments in anthropology*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1956. *Nuer religion*. Oxford University Press.
- 1965. *Theories of primitive religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 1973. Some reminiscences and reflections on fieldwork. *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, 4:1-12.
- 1976. *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande* (abridged edition). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ewing, Katherine 1994. Dreams from a saint: Anthropological atheism and the temptation to believe. *American Anthropologist*, 96(3):571-583.
- Favret-Saada, Jeanne 1980. *Deadly words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gable, Eric 1995. The decolonization of consciousness: Local skeptics and the 'will to be modern' in a West African village. *American Ethnologist*, 22(2):242-257.
- Geertz, Clifford 1976. 'From the native's point of view': On the nature of anthropological understanding. In K.H. Basso & H.A. Selby (eds) *Meaning in anthropology*, pp.231-237. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- 1988. Slide-show: Evans-Pritchard's African transparencies. In *Works and lives: The anthropologist as author*, pp.49-72. Stanford University Press.
- Gellner, Ernest 1986. Emile Masqueray (1843-1894): The bases of social order and the colonial looking glass. In J. Hall (ed.) *Rediscoveries*, pp.65-84. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Harding, Susan 1987. Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The rhetoric of fundamental Baptist conversion. *American Ethnologist*, 14(1):167-181.

Evans-Pritchard

At least since Evans-Pritchard's famous encounter with 'the light of witchcraft' in Zandeland, one evening in the late 1920s as he was taking his usual 'nocturnal stroll' (1976:11), anthropologists have asked themselves how belief in the spiritual world affects interpretive frameworks – both their own and those of others (e.g. Horton 1967; cf. Gable 1995, E. Turner 1996). Evans-Pritchard tried to show how the supposedly 'irrational' beliefs of the Azande followed a logic that made perfect sense in their terms, and that witchcraft could be understood through the anthropological lens as an idiom for explaining misfortune. In line with this argument, he concluded at first that the light he saw on that unusual evening 'was possibly a handful of grass lit by someone on his way to defecate' (1976:11). It could be explained away, in other words, without recourse to the supernatural. But this is a question he left open. What is interesting in this case is that Evans-Pritchard brought another variable into the picture, noting, in fact, that a relative of Tupoi, his Zande neighbour, died the day after Evans-Pritchard saw the light and that this 'accorded well with Zande ideas' about the night-time workings of witchcraft. In what is otherwise a very precise ethnography – as Geertz once said, with Evans-Pritchard 'what you see is what you get, deep reading is not encouraged' (1988:61) – this is an important moment of interpretive ambiguity.

Following in Durkheim's footsteps, many anthropologists treat incidents and encounters like Evans-Pritchard's as 'social facts' and leave it at that. Even Evans-Pritchard himself argued, in *Theories of primitive religion*, that:

there is no possibility of [the anthropologist] knowing whether the spiritual beings of primitive religions or of any others have any existence or not, and since that is the case he cannot take the question into consideration. The beliefs are for him sociological facts, not theological facts, and his sole concern is with their relation to each other and to other social facts. His problems are scientific, not metaphysical or ontological. (1965:17)

Historians of anthropology have clearly documented this emphasis on the sociological facts of religion within British social anthropology, leading from A.R. Radcliffe-Brown back to Durkheim (Stocking 1984, 1995; Kuper 1983). In reference to Evans-Pritchard's place in this lineage, however, J.A. Barnes has shown that he was 'never fully committed' (1987:458) to any particular theoretical position. Moreover, Barnes argues that Evans-Pritchard was reticent when it came to acknowledging his intellectual forbears (see also Douglas 1980). These claims are supported by the evidence of *Theories*. In a way Evans-Pritchard did identify himself with the Durkheimian tradition (1965:54-77; see also Gellner 1986:69, cited in

Barnes 1987:466). Yet Evans-Pritchard was critical of Durkheim's work and also, particularly after his well-known Marett Lecture at Oxford in 1950, of the influence of Radcliffe-Brown's understanding of anthropology as an ahistorical science (Kuper 1983, Barnes 1987). Because he organized his enquiry around the search for the origins of religion, Durkheim's conclusions were, according to Evans-Pritchard, 'little more than conjecture' (1965:73). They were full of what he called, following Rudyard Kipling, 'just-so stories'. They were neither scientific nor anthropological. 'To my mind', Evans-Pritchard wrote,

it is extraordinary that anyone could have thought it worth while to speculate about what might have been the origin of some custom or belief, when there is absolutely no means of discovering, in the absence of historical evidence, what was its origin. (1965:101)

Evans-Pritchard aims this criticism not only at Durkheim, but also at Comte, Saint-Simon, Lang and Tylor. The problem in the approaches of these ancestral figures lay in the abstract goals of their science. For Evans-Pritchard, anthropology as a science 'deals with relations, not with origins and essences' (1965:111). This is an important distinction for method. What we might term the 'science of relations' is necessarily tied to what the anthropologist observes. Fieldwork, in other words, must form the backbone of any anthropological examination of religion, which is why the search for origins is a vain pursuit. Fieldwork is essential because it focuses on empirical activities, and this is how anthropologists can best understand religion as a social fact. Yet the field is also the place where the problem of belief arises most powerfully for the anthropologist of religion.

At numerous points in Evans-Pritchard's work, the integrity of his empirical observations as a scientist broke down. There are moments when his anthropological enquiries take on a theological tinge – the kind of metaphysical problems he sometimes said should be left alone, most famously at the end of *Nuer religion*, where he claimed to have reached the point where 'the theologian takes over from the anthropologist' (1956:322). His encounter with the 'light of witchcraft', is one of the most notable moments in which he left open the question of his expert authority. Another moment can be found at the end of *Theories*. In my opinion it is a more interesting example of the quandary because he is addressing a theory of method, rather than a particular instance in which that method is used.

Throughout *Theories* Evans-Pritchard's critique of the corpus of anthropological work on religion is based largely on method. For all of their insights, Durkheim, Tylor and other 19th-century social theorists fall short of truly under-

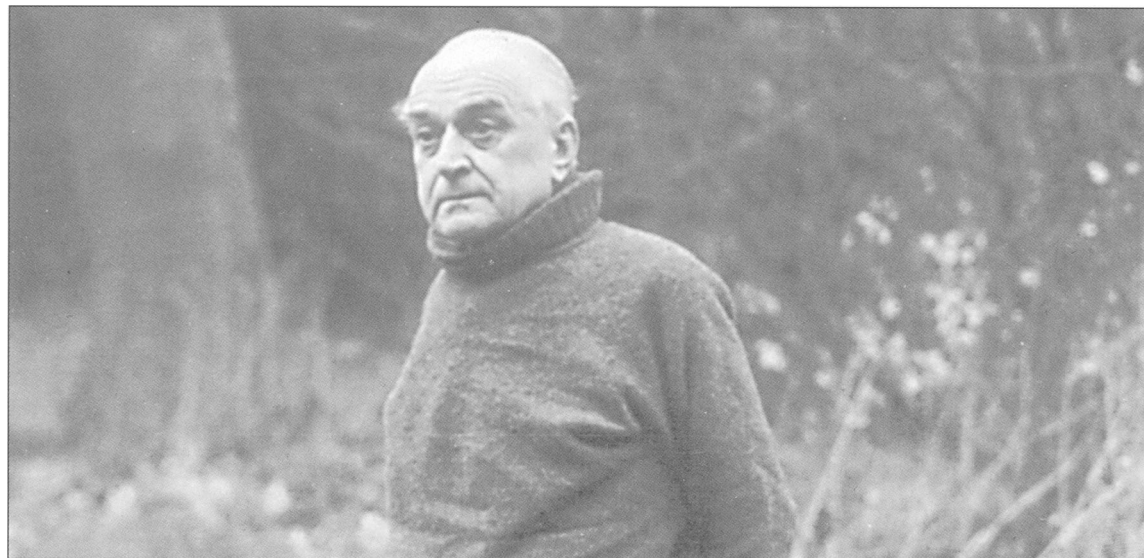


Fig. 3. Sir E.E. Evans-Pritchard in the garden of his home in Oxford in 1973.

- Hoehler-Fatton, Cynthia 1996. *Women of fire and spirit: History, faith and gender in Roho religion in western Kenya*. Oxford University Press.
- Horton, Robin 1967. African traditional thought and western science. *Africa*, 37(2):155-187.
- Kapferer, Bruce 1996. Preface to the 1996 edition. In: V.W. Turner, *Schism and continuity in an African society: A study of Ndembu village life*. Oxford: Berg.
- Kuper, Adam 1983. *Anthropology and anthropologists: The modern British School*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Lienhardt, Godfrey 1974. Evans-Pritchard: A personal view. *Man*, 9:299-304.
- Muller, Carol Ann 1999. *Rituals of fertility and the*

standing what religion is all about because they did not conduct fieldwork. What we feel towards the end of this short book, then, is that *experience* has been cheated. We recognize, as does Evans-Pritchard, that fieldwork provides a kind of experience – a kind of proximity to the sociological facts of religion. Yet in the penultimate paragraph of the text, just as Evans-Pritchard has finished extolling the virtues of fieldwork, he tells us it is not enough. Religion enters on a personal level. For the *religious* anthropologist of religion, the social fact of its existence takes on added meaning. Evans-Pritchard stopped just short of saying a background as a believer gives the anthropologist a privileged understanding, but he turned to the work of Wilhelm Schmidt to make the point for him. 'On this point', Evans-Pritchard wrote,

I find myself in agreement with Schmidt... 'If religion is essentially of the inner life, it follows that it can truly 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 [non-believer] will talk of religion as a blind man might of colours, or one totally devoid of ear, of a beautiful musical composition.' (1965:121)

Not only does Evans-Pritchard critique armchair anthropologists, he critiques his atheist colleagues. In the study of religion, one's own 'inner life' provides a privileged position from which to view the social world.

Given Evans-Pritchard's argument, I think it is appropriate to say something about his own 'inner life'. During the Second World War, Evans-Pritchard converted to Catholicism (Beidelman 1991, Lienhardt 1974, Barnes

1987). Toward the end of his life – and I would argue that the last few passages in *Theories* represent a key instance – this is something he addressed more and more openly. Those who knew him have described him as a devoted Catholic but not a 'good' one: 'his undoubted faith was accompanied, if never disturbed, by a sharp apprehension of the possibilities of unbelief, a sympathy for cynics' (Lienhardt 1974:303). He was also, perhaps because of his training, open to other religious traditions. Barnes' memoir gives us a sense of this:

In the last few years of his life [Evans-Pritchard] became interested in mysticism and, in a remarkable paper read to a student audience, argued in almost lyrical language that, in some important sense, mystics of all religious persuasions, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Jewish as well as Christian, experience the same transcendental reality... Evans-Pritchard commented to [Meyer] Fortes, who was in the audience, that, 'It must have been apparent to you, if not to them, that this is my inner life...' (1987:480)

This catholicity is also evident in a short reflection on fieldwork published in the year that Evans-Pritchard died, in which he wrote: 'I would say that I learnt more about the nature of God and our human predicament from the Nuer than I ever learnt at home' (1973:5). For Evans-Pritchard, scientific enquiry is linked to religious practice through the concern for *relations* – a concern which can only be understood if it is in some sense shared. In Evans-Pritchard's mind, it is this type of 'religious unity', as much as the general experience of fieldwork, that leads an anthropologist to any fruitful understanding of religion.

Incorporating religion-as-belief into the 'scientific' study of religion is not without its problems. As J. Samuel Preus argues, 'religion and the study of religion enjoy no privileged status', and to claim otherwise – from the position of inner belief – is 'self-serving' (1987:xix). Yet it seems to me that at the end of *Theories* Evans-Pritchard was attempting, in the face of his discipline's empiricism, to add some humanistic texture – 'even of art', according to his friend and colleague Godfrey Lienhardt (1974:301) – to the scientific discourse of anthropology. He wanted to call into question, if only momentarily, the sway of Durkheim's atheism. He left this argument unfinished, but it is one that other anthropologists have taken up with vigour. Of these, Victor Turner is particularly interesting and provides the second of our examples.

Victor Turner

Like Evans-Pritchard, Turner owed a good deal to Durkheim. As a student in Max Gluckman's 'Manchester School' (see Werbner 1984), Turner came to emphasize the dynamics between process and structure in the tradition of Marx and Durkheim. Turner's work on ritual, and particularly on *communitas* (1977), can be traced to Durkheim's treatment of collective effervescence in *The elementary forms*. Durkheim's argument that effervescence is a moment of religious creativity had a deep impact on Turner. At the start of *The drums of affliction*, Turner states that religious ritual 'actually creates, or re-creates, the categories through which men perceive reality' (1968:6). Indeed, *Drums*, which is Turner's most thorough treatment of healing cults among the Ndembu, is written in a distinctly sociological vein with an emphasis on the connections between the individual and the collective in religious representations. For example, Turner argues in his treatment of curing rites: 'it would seem that the needs of the biopsychical organism and the needs of society, in many respects opposed, come to terms with one another in the master symbols of Ndembu society' (1968:19). But in the short monograph *Chihamba, the white spirit*, Turner takes Evans-Pritchard's concern with the religious convictions of the anthropologist a step further, and he takes

Fig. 4. Victor Turner, second from left, collecting roots with Ndembu ritual specialists, circa 1952. Reproduced by permission of Edith Turner.



Fig. 5. A Chihamba adept draws a cross on her arm using white clay. Photo reproduced by permission of Edith Turner.



- sacrifice of desire:
Nazarite women's
performance in South
Africa. University of
Chicago Press.
- Preus, J. Samuel 1987.
*Explaining religion:
Criticism and theory from
Bodin to Freud*. New
Haven: Yale University
Press.
- Ray, Benjamin 2000.
Discourse about
difference: Understanding
African ritual language. In
K. Patton & B. Ray (eds)
*A magic still dwells:
Comparative religion in
the postmodern age*,
pp.101-116. Berkeley:
University of California
Press.
- Ruel, Malcolm 1997.
Christians as believers. In
*Belief, ritual, and the
securing of life: Reflexive
essays on a Bantu religion*.
Leiden: Brill.
- Stocking, George W. 1984.
Dr. Durkheim and Mr.
Brown: Comparative
sociology at Cambridge in
1910. In G.W. Stocking
(ed.) *Functionalism
historicized: Essays on
British social
anthropology*, pp.106-130.
Madison: University of
Wisconsin Press.
- 1995. *After Tylor: British
social anthropology, 1888-
1951*. Madison: University
of Wisconsin Press.
- Stoller, Paul & Cheryl Olkes
1987. *In sorcery's shadow:
A memoir of
apprenticeship among the
Songhay of Niger*.
University of Chicago
Press.
- Sundkler, Bengt 1961. *Bantu
prophets in South Africa*
(2nd edn). Oxford
University Press.
- Turner, Edith with William
Blodgett, Singleton
Kahona & Fideli Benwa
1992. *Experiencing ritual:
A new interpretation of
African healing*.
Philadelphia: University of
Pennsylvania Press.
- Turner, Edith 1996. *The
hands feel it: Healing and
spirit presence among a
northern Alaskan people*.
DeKalb: Northern Illinois
University Press.

Durkheim to task for his sociological reductionism. In *Chihamba*, Turner sounds more like the German romantics than the French sociologists. His emphasis is on the ineffable in religious experience, which did not fit easily into either Marxian or Durkheimian paradigms (Babcock and MacAloon 1987, Kapferer 1996; cf. Bloch 1986).

Chihamba is an Ndembu cult of affliction, one of the most influential and puzzling that Victor and Edith Turner studied during their fieldwork in Northern Rhodesia in the early 1950s (see Engelke [forthcoming]). Adepts in the *Chihamba* cult forge strong ties of friendship while working through their misfortunes. In the process, they try

to relate themselves and their lives to *Kavula*, something akin to a high god, whose essence is captured symbolically in the character of whiteness – white substances, white objects, etc. 'Whiteness', Turner argued, 'represents pure act-of-being' in Ndembu cosmology (1962:82). The goal of *Chihamba*, as religious ritual, is 'to break through the habitual patterns formed by secular custom, rational thinking and common sense, to a condition where the pure act-of-being is directly apprehended' (1962:85-86). The ritual, in other words, is meant to put the initiands in direct contact with the spiritual centre of their existence. As Turner describes it, this is an affective breakthrough.



Fig. 6. Victor Turner at his home in Charlottesville, Virginia, in the early 1980s. Reproduced by permission of Edith Turner.

And yet this is not a simple rehashing of collective effervescence. In *Chihamba* and other works Turner did indeed primarily want to show how ritual was creative, not a means of confirming the social status quo (see especially Turner 1977). But in part what is interesting in Turner's monograph on the white spirit is the appeal to humanistic disciplines he made on behalf of his scientific enquiry, and how he used this appeal to close the distance between himself and the Ndembu on a spiritual level. It is in *Chihamba*, in fact, that we find the most persuasive evidence of Turner's interest in literature and theology as tools for shaping his anthropological method. Indeed, Turner took as much – if not more – from Herman Melville and the Gospels as he did from Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown. He was at times passionately critical of the social scientific tradition. Moving beyond Evans-Pritchard's argument that religious belief can be best understood by the religious scholar, Turner claimed that the academic study of religion will always, ultimately, fail. 'Religion is not determined by anything other than itself', Turner argued (1962:92), and it cannot be reduced to an anthropological account. 'In studying religious symbols', he wrote,

the product of humble vision, we must ourselves be humble if we are to glimpse, if not fully comprehend, the spiritual truths represented by them. In this realm of data only innocence can hope to attain understanding. That is the reason the attempts of such scholars and philosophers as Fraser and Durkheim to explain away religious phenomena have been so obviously unsuccessful. Like Captain Ahab [in *Moby Dick*], such scholars seek to destroy that which centrally menaces and wounds their self-sufficiency, i.e., the belief in a Deity, and like Ahab they suffer shipwreck without transfixing the quick of their intended victim. (1962:92)

These are strong words, based like those of Evans-Pritchard upon the assumption that religious belief carries with it a certain privilege to understand religious experience – that one's inner life provides a key to explaining the inner lives of others. After *Chihamba*, Turner always made clear his firm belief that poets and prophets could offer rich insights into social life from which anthropologists ought to draw. He called this 'the humanistic coefficient' (1974:33), and argued that a poet's sense of spirituality (William Blake was his favourite) should inform any good study of religion (cf. Bloch 1986).

From the standpoint of intellectual biography, it is worth mentioning that Turner wrote *Chihamba* shortly after his conversion to Catholicism in 1957.³ It was also soon after his and Edith's fourth child, Lucy, died as a newborn. Turner was, in other words, wrestling with the contingencies of life as he articulated his anthropological analysis. As Edith Turner described it to me,

In the late 1950s, a very important thing happened in our lives: we joined the Catholic Church... in Manchester. We had been knocking around in Manchester for a few years after the field

[research in Northern Rhodesia], a little depressed for a number of reasons. The Communist party, which we had joined after [World War II]... and which informed a good deal of our first fieldwork, had lost all appeal. African ritual had taken its place, and I suppose that for us, there was something of this ritual fever in the Catholic Church. (Engelke, 2000:847)

It is also worth mentioning that Turner pulled back from this repudiation of the academic study of religion in his later work – something Edith Turner sharply criticized in her husband (E. Turner et al. 1992; see also Engelke 2000). Consider, for example, this description of Ndembu diviners in *Drums*, which is cast in a much less fervent (if still open-ended) tone than we find in *Chihamba*:

The diviner is a ratiocinating individual. But the premises from which he deduces consequences may be non-rational ones. He does not try to 'go behind' his beliefs in supernatural beings and forces... He treats as self-evident truths what social anthropologists and depth psychologists would try to reduce to rational terms. These scholars, in their professional role at any rate, do not concede that spirits and witches have existence. For most of them these entities are themselves 'symbols' for endopsychic or social drives and forces, which they set themselves the task of discovering. (1968:43-44)

As I argue elsewhere (Engelke [forthcoming]), and as Edith Turner's recollections above suggest, it was the divide between professional and personal that came to vex Turner in his later years, and he did his best to break it down through his own religious investments. In *Drums* we can trace this recognition in passages like the one just cited. It is also evident in his and Edith Turner's work on Christian pilgrimage in Mexico and Ireland, conducted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which resulted in the publication of a seminal text, *Image and pilgrimage in Christian culture*. Pilgrimage 'research' became a convenient way for Turner to blur the distinctions between his personal and professional life (Turner and Turner 1978). He could trek to Knock Shrine or visit Lourdes as an anthropologist and a native (i.e. a pious Catholic), with little thought, justifiably or not, for his 'professional duty' of maintaining distance.

Conclusion

In these brief accounts of Evans-Pritchard and Turner, I have tried to show how their writings suggest that belief is an element in their methods. Religious conviction became a tool in their anthropological projects, a way of bridging the distance between themselves and 'the other'. It may well have been an 'embarrassing possibility', to return to Ewing's insight, but we can see how they seized upon the recognition that their anthropological subjects had something to say to them about 'the inner life'.

As I have already suggested in passing, we can find shortcomings in this approach. To claim a perspective on 'the inside' of religious belief begs the question of what is valuable about being 'outside' of it, a question that every anthropologist deals with at some level as a participant-observer. Moreover, we might ask with Ruel (1997) if their understanding of belief and the 'inner life' is a specifically Christian – even Catholic – viewpoint. These are important considerations.

But when we read their work we should also take note of the moments when they slipped out of a clearly 'professional' frame and treated such considerations as a mixture of personal and intellectual challenges – when belief, in other words, became method. This may not have resolved all of their anthropological concerns, but then again perhaps that was not the point. Perhaps the point was to suggest that the study of religion, even in the tradition of scholarship indebted to Durkheim, often retains something ineffable. ●

Turner, Victor 1962.

Chihamba, the white spirit. Manchester University Press for the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute.

– 1968. *The drums of affliction: A study of religious processes among the Ndembu of Zambia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

– 1974. *Dramas, fields, and metaphors*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

– 1977. *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Turner, Victor & Edith Turner 1978. *Image and pilgrimage in Christian culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Werbner, Richard 1984. The Manchester School of south-central Africa. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 13:157-185.