Commonwealth countries have done, may only have scratched the surface of their legal and administrative requirements — from experiments in forms of self-government to specific law reform, courts, legal aid, the public service, indeed the whole gamut of modern statehood where order and justice amid rapid change provides even greater challenges than more fortunate countries often have to meet. When most of the recent literature on developing countries tends to have a socio-economic emphasis, it is good to find a superbly fashioned small volume restoring the role of law to its eminence even where the rule of law often has yet to be fully understood.

McGill University,
Montreal, Canada

MAXWELL COHEN


These two books taken together reflect the watershed that has emerged in recent years in African religious and philosophical writing. Parrinder writes from an outside, historical, and descriptive viewpoint, occasionally making an evaluative statement. Mbiti writes from a professedly inside position as an African churchman and scholar, taking an ontological and at times apologetical stance. It should be clear from a comparison of the two works that however much our understanding of African religion has been enhanced following the method used here by Parrinder, we stand to learn more, in a different way, from the Africans who write of their own religious traditions, deriving a philosophy from them.

Parrinder's work is a useful introduction and historical survey to the “living religions” of Africa: traditional religions (Part I), Christianity (Part II), and Islam (Part III). It is not immediately evident, though, whether Parrinder’s epithet “living religions” covers simply contemporary religion of whatever variety, or includes also the historical antecedents of today’s belief systems. Unfortunately Parrinder is swayed by certain of the less impressive stereotypical assumptions of Western scholarship in his approach. While Christianity and Islam apparently have a history, traditional African religions, defined as “older preliterate religions,” presumably do not. These latter are portrayed in the ethnographic present in the ethnographic present of pre-contact times, in terms of a-historical “beliefs and customs.” The dynamic or developmental features of African traditional systems of thought discussed in the classic works by Evans-Pritchard on the Azande, Bohannan on the Tiv, Turner on the Ndembu, or Sundkler on South African groups, all of which offer evidence that non-literate does not mean non-historical, are hardly hinted at by Parrinder.

The chapters on Christianity and Islam, by contrast, offer a more nuanced survey of personalities and movements from the beginning of these two religious systems in Africa. This is particularly the case with regard to early African Christianity toward which an entire interesting chapter is devoted, although considering Parrinder’s criterion of living religions, slightly out of keeping; ex-

cept in Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt, early African Christianity disappeared under the force of Islam. Independent churches are discussed under the rubric of Christianity, with the author considering them “Christianity's most effective means of spreading the faith.” The adaptive quality of Christianity and Islam in Africa is well appreciated by Parrinder, for his chapters on Islam, just as those on Christianity, emphasize the religious orders, in particular the Sufi, which were in the main responsible for the spread of Islam. While this book offers little that is new or original in the study of African religious phenomena, it provides an accurate survey by a reputable scholar.

Mbiti's study appears on the surface to be an expanded version of Parrinder's section on traditional African religion, although Mbiti also has chapters on Christianity and Islam in Africa. Mbiti, like Parrinder, in writing of traditional religion relies heavily on the body of ethnographic present a-historical literature which whenever quoted or paraphrased has X tribe practicing Y custom or belief. This type of reconstruction leads both writers into giving an exaggerated interpretation of the tribe or people as an autonomous, culturally homogeneous, unit. Mbiti goes so far as to speak of each of the more than 1000 peoples of Africa as having its own religion. Needless to say, to follow different ethnographies on a single "people" in a literal manner leads to considerable contradiction if not outright distortion. It does us little service to learn from Mbiti, for example, that some African peoples hold black sacred, while for others the sacred color is white.

Despite these shortcomings, most of which are traceable to Mbiti's overly faithful following of erroneous material by other scholars, his work has some noteworthy new and original perspectives. He seeks to demonstrate that even in the face of Black Africa's diversity of empiric religions, there is an underlying commonality of religious thought, evident in the ontological base of African philosophy. Such a philosophy consists in the "understanding attitude of mind, logic, and perception behind the manner in which African peoples think, act, or speak in different situations of life" (p. 2). Mbiti acknowledges his debt for this patently ontological approach to Temples' Bantu Philosophy, "not so much for its emphasis on 'vital force' as in the sympathy for the existence of a notion of being in Luba thought"; Jahn's Muntu, "whatever one may think of his universalization of categories, for his emphasis on NTU as a philosophy of being" (inspired by Alexis Kagame's Philosophie bantu ruandaise de l'être); and J. V. Taylor's The Primal Vision, "whatever one may think of its non-critical embrace of Africa's 'primal world,' for his effort to perceive African thought" (pp. 10–12). To Africans, Mbiti generalizes, religion is supremely an ontological matter, pertaining to the question of existence or being.

The African religious ontology, if we follow Mbiti, exists in a highly anthropocentric categorization of the universe into relationships with man: (1) God as the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of both man and all things; (2) spirits being made up of superhuman beings and the spirits of men who died a long time ago; (3) man, including human beings who are alive and those about to be born; (4) animals and plants, or the remainder of biological life; and (5) phenomena and objects without biological life (p. 16). Possibly more intrinsically interesting even than these ontological categories is Mbiti's portrayal, as a theory of worship, of the "ontological balance" in the universe relating God and man, spirits and man, the departed and the living.