

### BOOK REVIEWS

**The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospects** Edited by J. Platvoet, J. Cox and J. Olupona. Cambridge, Roots and Branches, 1996, 333pp.

It always takes time to get proceedings from scholarly symposia published. This volume contains papers presented at a hopefully epoch-making seminar on the study of religions in Africa at the University of Zimbabwe in September 1992. It was the first regional conference of the International Association for the History of Religions, which dealt with the religious history of Africa. In addition to a Word of Welcome by the then Vice Chancellor, Professor Gordon Chavunduka (p3), it contains 17 items. Six of them are by scholars who are — or have been — related to the University of Zimbabwe either on a permanent basis (M. Bourdillon), or more temporarily (J. Platvoet, J. Cox and F. Verstraelen).

The volume is quite informative. Even if the main focus is on the study of religions in Africa, it also shares interesting insights about African religious history. Platvoet offers an ambitious long-term perspective (pp 46–102), which also adds some qualifications on Terence Ranger's plea for the *historical* study of African traditional religions (see also pp 126–7). There are most useful items on the rise of Islam, and the development of Jewry in South Africa (cf. pp 293–309 and 434–57).

The strength of the volume is its contribution to the historiography of religious studies, even if the regional focus of the respective authors are very evident. His Ghanaian experience qualifies Platvoet's surveys (pp 46–102), and 105–38), as do the South African and Nigerian starting points inform what M. Prozesky and J. Olupona provide (cf. pp 229–51 and 185–200, with supplementary general survey on West Africa, 211–19).

By implication, the volume pleads for methodological pluralism in the study of religions in Africa. Most sophisticated is Cox, who spells out an argument in favour of an open-ended phenomenological approach to the study from within of different African traditional religions (pp 155–82). In his very informative survey of the study of religions in Nigeria, Olupona illustrates his methodological comprehensiveness (pp 185–218). In his personally involved and very thought-provoking contribution, Bourdillon convincingly shows how anthropological *epoché* has to be combined with judgements with reference to common human concerns (cf. pp 139–54).

Commenting on the volume as a whole, I have to share a few critical observations. Given the provenance of the papers, it is to be regretted that they do not give room for an item on the study of Islam in Malawi and Zimbabwe by Dr. E. Mandivenga, an expert on the subjects, who at the time was Chairman in the Department, which hosted the conference.

My more general observations concern the limitations of what the volume has to say about the study of Christianity in Africa. Different authors express a necessary criticism of claims to interpret African traditional religions from Christian starting points in an attempt to develop an African Christian Theology. In his contribution, Verstraelen advances a healthy but very general argument in favour of the study of Church History from an African perspective. In his survey of "The Religions of Africa in their Historical Order" (pp 46-102), Platvoet limits himself to subscribe to the distinction between "Ethiopian Christianity" (sic!), "Modern Missionary Christianity" and "Indigenous Christianity" (pp 58-64). This classification may serve some purpose at a very general level. It is limited, however, as it does not take very far the study from within of Christianity in its variety in different African contexts.

In his keynote address (pp 37-45), the Secretary-General of the International Association for the History of Religions, Dr Michael Pye, challenged the conference to consider "what is the deep-seated frame of reference . . . which informs cultural insider's reflection on African religion"; we may add in its plurality (cf. p 45). It seems to me that Olupona's comprehensive contribution on the study of religions in Nigeria is closest to an answer to that question.

*Institute of Development Studies*

CARL F. HALLENCREUTZ

**Empowerment or Repression? ESAP and Children in Zimbabwe** By *Rodreck Mupedziswa*. Silveira House Social Series No. 13, Gweru, Mambo Press, 57pp.

This welcome book brings together many of the issues concerning children in Zimbabwe today that give rise to grave concern. These include: deteriorating educational opportunities and attendance at school, deteriorating nutritional levels, deteriorating health and health facilities, increasing shortage of housing, child labour and child sexual abuse. It is useful to have this data brought together in an accessible form.

One problem I have with the book is the precise relationship between the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) and the problems described. Some of the problems are directly related to the policies of ESAP, such as the introduction of fees for education and health services. However, the social development fund was introduced with ESAP to alleviate these problems, and poor administration of the fund is not the fault of the programme. Other causes of problems, such as the decline in employment opportunities, the lack of funds in government and the decline of the value of the Zimbabwean currency, are assumed in this book to