

Chapter 1

Introduction

There are few countries, of whatever size, which present the individual interested in religion with such a wealth of historical, psychological, sociological and theological material as the island of Jamaica. It is a veritable treasure-house of religious ideas, groups, sects, cults and movements which derive from both the Old World and the New.

Wherever man exists there are concepts of God, religion, powers, spirits, ghosts and magical means of manipulating the physical as well as the spiritual. There are the orthodox, the liberals, the modernists, the black witches, the white magicians, the spiritualists and those who look to some millennium when all man's material and spiritual problems will be resolved; and Jamaica is certainly no exception. Most of the religious and religio-political movements of the world are to be found epitomized in some form in Jamaica. It is a country full of colour, hope, yearning, depression, despair, utopian dreams, nostalgic longings, gaiety, fear, belief, doubt and superstition.

The present approach to the subject is both historical and sociological; and it looks at the religious conditions of a people who have, over the years, suffered incredible degradation and suppression. They were provided with a patent dual morality by an imperial slave-trading society – the Christian ideal beyond their realization and the more easily attainable slave morality – and they have endured the impingement of every kind of sectarian Christian mission.

It might well be possible to classify all the religious cults and movements in Jamaica, as elsewhere, by means of some convenient sociological typology. But to seek to do so would be to lose some of the life and the existential drama of the whole process, as well as to force a somewhat artificial framework upon something that is in a very real sense incommensurable. Such typologies are fictions, however useful, designed to facilitate understanding of social causation and human reaction to deep personal need.

The needs of the Jamaicans, in religious terms, are met in a great variety of ways. There are, nevertheless, certain common denominators in their religious experience. It is interesting to note, for example, the extent to which the rituals of magic and similar patterns of psychic and spiritual behaviour permeate most of their religious sects and cults. There is something elemental about their religious

experience which harks back to their African ancestors' beliefs.

In order, therefore, to understand fully the development of the variety of religion in Jamaica it is necessary to have a look at the historical origins and background of the Jamaican people, their treatment by so-called civilized societies, and their own search for an identity through their religious faith and their religio-political movements. Some still persisting practices in Jamaica, such as obeah, are not conducive to the healthy development of their society, and are forbidden by law.

There are many other vestiges of African cults, which have survived through the years of slavery down to modern times. A few have been resuscitated somewhat artificially long after they have died a natural death, in order, according to the indigenous belief, to establish or re-establish a cultural identity and solidarity.

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