

CHANGING FACES OF CHRISTIANITY

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# HOW THE STUDY OF POPULAR RELIGIONS CAN HELP US IN OUR THEOLOGICAL TASK

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## Abstract

*At a time when inclusion is becoming more important not only for our academic integrity but also for our very survival, popular religions push in a healthy direction. In a world bereft of peace and torn apart with conflicts between "those within" and "those forced outside", and at a time when "enemy" images abound, popular religions call for the admission of greater pluralism and inclusion. If our theological constructions are not to be monologues but dialogues for life that include all of creation, then our engagements in the study of popular religions could aid us in our theological, as well as our missiological tasks.*

*This article explores how popular religions may help Christian theology take seriously multiple voices, and so create a truly liberative theology. The article looks at how the study of religion in the past impacts on the study of popular religion. It then identifies some of the difficulties inherent in the study of "popular religion". Finally, the article explores how popular religions may be used in the construction of Christian theology, and the implications of this for Christian mission.*

Using the theme *Visioning New Life Together Among Asian Religions*, participants at an Asian theological discussion in Jogjakarta, Indonesia, in August 2001, wrestled with two interlocking questions: "How can Christians live together with people of other faiths?" and, "What are the methods of theological enquiry that will help us to relate to other religious traditions?" The religious traditions we looked at were Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and that nebulous area of religion called variously folk, traditional, indigenous or popular religion. It is the last area that will be the focus of this paper.

I will first look at how "religion" has been studied in the past, and how it impacts on the study of "popular religion". Second, I will identify some of the difficulties inherent in the

study of "popular religion". Finally, I will show how "popular religions" may be used in the construction of Christian theology, and with the implications of this for Christian mission. This area of discussion will show how "popular religions" may help us take seriously multiple voices, in order to create a truly liberative theology.

## What is "religion"?

The debate about what religion is, how it can be defined, and how a particular religion can be categorized, has gone on for some time.

Most are agreed that the attempt to define the term "religion" is itself a Western enterprise. Winston King says that there are two reasons why Western scholars attempt to abstract something from human behaviour and label it "religious". One is a general Western speculative, intellectual and scientific desire or disposition to analyse and categorize all reality. The other reason is the monotheistic climate, inherited from Judaism, Christianity and Islam, within which scholars operate. This climate of thought tends to postulate a separation, or division, between a transcendent deity and everything else.<sup>1</sup> Non-Western cultures, on the other hand, tend to see reality as a whole, and without attempting to divide and categorize reality. Even in traditions that have a sense of deity, a transcendent deity tends to be an integral part of the cosmic whole. In some cases, like the Advaita Vedanta tradition, it is the essence of the whole itself.

Jonathan Z. Smith understands religion in a manner similar to King. In *Imagining Religion*, Smith argues that religion is an act of the second order, thus meaning that religion as a concept is an academic construction. A religion is a loosely shaped system created by the scholar for purposes of comparison and generalization. The raw materials from which these systems are created are data, phenomena, human experiences and expressions that one culture or another considers to be religious.<sup>2</sup> Rather than putting forward a method for defining the concept of religion, Smith offers a method for defining what might go into a particular religious system by tracing what he calls "sacred persistence"<sup>3</sup> in a particular context. Smith's concept of sacred persistence draws upon characteristics of religions as described by Cicero and Freud. Cicero states in *De Natura Deorum* that "religious" is derived from *relegere* meaning, together, to collect, to go over again, to review mentally. Therefore, the religious person is one who is preoccupied with the careful review, and going over of all that pertains to the gods.<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud in *Obsessive Acts and Religious Practice* describes religious acts as simi-

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, s.v. "Religion" by Winston King, p. 282.

<sup>2</sup> J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. xi.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, as quoted by J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 38.

lar to the obsessive acts of a neurotic, in that such acts focus on particular activities of everyday life, elaborate them and then turn them into matters of great importance.<sup>5</sup> Drawing from these understandings of "religious", Smith describes sacred persistence as composed of the following elements: a) an excessive obsession with textual details which are presumed to give details about the gods; b) an attention to the significance and perfection of particular activities linked with the gods.<sup>6</sup> From a vast number of things that could function as hierophanies<sup>7</sup> (divine intimations), a religion collects and focuses on a particular number. It then finds multiple ways to express them.<sup>8</sup>

Smith uses a culinary example to illustrate the idea. Despite the many fruits that can be used to produce wine, we have focused on the grape. We then proceed to determine the almost infinite ways in which varieties of grapes can be produced, and the types of wine that can be made from them.<sup>9</sup> The same methodology comes into play when defining the content of a particular religion. Of the immeasurable number of objects and events that can function as hierophanies, a religion chooses particular ones, and then finds what seems like countless ways of explaining them. To the study of religion belongs the ways in which these choices are made, justified and expanded upon.

The problem with this method of thinking about religion is that it assumes that religions, which are in fact academic constructions, may be used as comprehensive systems into which particular hierophanies can be placed, categorized and explained. In large measure, such an approach owes its credibility to the fact that religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity have been explained with some measure of satisfaction as coherent systems. While this approach may be adequate, though debatable, for these religions, it is certainly not adequate for understanding "popular religion", as we shall see below.

## The challenge of "popular religion"

The term "popular religions" is used in this paper to refer to a number of, for want of a better term, "folk religions". These religions are not easily classified but they are real in the lives of people. Even Max Weber, an important figure in the construction of descriptive systems to explain religious phenomena and traditions, had difficulties with this area of study.

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Obsessive Acts and Religious Practice*, as quoted by J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Mircea Eliade in *Patterns In Comparative Religion* argues that anything can be, and possibly has been, used to create a hierophany. Smith uses this argument to shore up his thesis.

<sup>8</sup> In the idea of obsessive expansion, the Freudian theme of obsessive acts can be seen.

<sup>9</sup> J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

Though what Weber refers to has been translated as "popular religion",<sup>10</sup> what he actually means is harder to describe.<sup>11</sup> For Max Weber, the concept translated as "popular religion" seems to be a repository for all ideas and practices that do not fit into his intellectual systems but cannot be ignored in the embodiment of religion in different contexts and cultures.

For a long period of time, the subject of popular religion has either been ignored or dismissed as irrelevant. Perhaps it is because of its resistance to being intellectualized and systematized, and therefore explained. Perhaps it is also because popular religion is largely found among the non-privileged of society and therefore not considered as important. However, it is only within the last twenty-five years that the study of "popular religion" has come into prominence.

The more the subject is studied, the more it becomes clear that this field is difficult to define or describe in a comprehensive way. Jacques Berlinerblau believes that there are several reasons for this.<sup>12</sup> First, scholars of the subject come from diverse academic disciplines such as the history of religion, sociology, political science, theology, history and cultural anthropology. Each discipline brings in new methods to observe and describe the subject matter. Second, the study of popular religion came into vogue around the same time as the postmodern movement, which is suspicious of meta-systems of thought. Consequently, the methodology for constructing all-inclusive systems to describe even religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, as was done in the past, is suspect. Third, the sheer diversity of types of "popular religions" also does not easily lend itself to description.

Another difficulty that Berlinerblau fails to note is that two different types of phenomena are lumped together under the category of popular religion. One is the popular aspect of so-called "major religions". These are, so to speak, popular offshoots of mainline religions. To give some examples, there is the popular religiosity which surrounds such pilgrim sites as "Our Lady of Lourdes", the worship of the saints in the Santeria, and Yoruba traditions that have grown out of Catholicism. Buddhism is another religious tradition that lends itself to popularizing in ways such as the worship of the Buddha himself as a god, or the various Maitreya Buddhist traditions. Berlinerblau cites the studies of Norman Cohn and Ellen Badone as places where examples of popular religion are given.<sup>13</sup> Actually, the two authors give descriptions of "heresy" in mainline religions. In the words of Badone, such examples

<sup>10</sup> *Volksreligiosität, Massenreligion, Massenglauben.*

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Berlinerblau, "Max Weber's Useful Ambiguities and Problem of Defining 'Popular Religion'", in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Sept 2001, Vol. 69, No. 3, pp. 605-626.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 606ff.

<sup>13</sup> Ellen Badone, "Introduction", in *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society*, ed., Ellen Badone, Princeton, Princeton University Press, as quoted by Jacques Berlinerblau, *op. cit.*, p. 615.

are "those informal, unofficial practices, beliefs and styles of religious expression that lack the formal sanction of the established church structures."<sup>14</sup>

The other phenomena placed under the category of "popular religion" are the so-called primal, tribal or animistic practices found all over the world.<sup>15</sup> Aloysius Pieris categorizes these practices as cosmic religions. Pieris describes them as religions in which "the order of nature and the order of society overlap; social harmony is insured by the cosmic communion with the elements of nature."<sup>16</sup> These religions arise out of the attempt of a people to deal with life in this world, and they are part of the psyche of all the people that participate wherever cosmic religions are found. Pieris contrasts this religiosity with metacosmic religiosity which "postulates the existence of a transphenomenal Reality immanently operative in the cosmos and soteriologically available within the human person either through agape (redeeming love) or gnosis (redeeming knowledge)."<sup>17</sup> Cosmic religions are about this-worldly issues, even when they deal with invisible, seemingly otherworldly concepts like ancestors and gods.<sup>18</sup> In a sense, they are deeply practical religions interested in addressing life in the here and now rather than focusing on issues of soteriology and a time beyond.

With all of these difficulties in mind, how does one define or describe "popular religion"? Berlinerblau puts forward three approaches. The first is the economic and sociological approach, which links this particular type of religiosity with a given social and economic class, which we may call "the under-privileged".<sup>19</sup> Chung Hung Kyung speaks of this type of religion as "the losers' religion".<sup>20</sup> The problem with this approach is that it does not take into account the fact that while popular religion has strong links with under-privileged socio-economic classes, people in all classes of society also practice it. This is why neither the romanticization of "popular religion" as the liberative religion of the poor, as do Chung Hyun Kyung and some other liberation theologians, nor the cynical rejection of it as the opiate of the people, as do some socialists, really captures the complicated relationship that popular religion has with under-privileged socio-economic classes.

Berlinerblau's second approach is one of *praxis*. This approach tries to define "popular religion" by describing the religious practices all popular religions hold in common. Here it is

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> A fair amount of work has been done in the area of "primitive religions" that are important to ethnological and anthropological studies, as found in such works as E.E. Evans-Prichard, *Theories of Primitive Religions*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1965.

<sup>16</sup> Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, New York, Orbis Books, 1988, p. 43.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> Pieris includes religions such as Confucianism and Shintoism under the category of cosmic religions, *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> Chung, Hung Kyung, "Popular Religion and the Fullness of Life: An Eco-Feminist Reflection", in *Visioning New Life Together Among Asian Religions*, Hong Kong, CCA Publications, 2001, pp. 147-159.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

assumed that popular religion is the religion of the under-privileged. Berlinerblau gives the examples of "magic, an antirational orientation, a close bond with nature, a 'this-worldly' religious attitude, heightened concern with salvation and saviour figures."<sup>21</sup> The problem with this approach is that some of the practices credited to "popular religions" are found in mainline traditions. For example, Judaism has a very strong "this-worldly" orientation, and there is a very strong impulse toward salvation and saviour figures in many mainline religions including Christianity.

The third approach put forward by Berlinerblau for defining "popular religion" is the synthesis of the first two approaches. This approach tries to understand the relationship between religious practices found in popular religions and the disenfranchised communities in which these practices are found. This approach has two variations.<sup>22</sup> The first is the essentialist approach, which assumes that there are some basic practices that can be found among non-privileged classes in every society. The second approach is more relational and relativistic; it focuses on power relations. Value judgements are implicit in language such as "magic" and "antirational orientation". Who has the power to label and colour religious practices, and how does such labelling affect the understanding of "popular religion"?

### Beyond prejudice and romanticization

Discussions of popular religions tend to fall into two areas. One area is prejudice that arises out of the problem of categorization. As has been pointed out above, popular religions do not lend themselves to easy categorization. Their resistance to being intellectualized and systematized has led them to being dismissed as superstitious and irrelevant. It has also led them to being characterized as "eclectic and unorganized".<sup>23</sup> In actuality, a popular religion is very structured at the local level. It deals in a multifaceted way with how people may live sanely, staying clear of what is dangerous and demonic, and embracing what is life giving and beneficial. A popular religion deals with how people eat, work, relate and deal with life altering events of gain, like birth, and loss, like death and illness. It gives a very clear and detailed method of how to live. It is about social structure and maintenance of equilibrium. Therefore, to characterize popular religion as loosely structured is deceiving.

The second is the area of romanticization. Under the assumption that popular religion is the religion of the non-privileged, there is a tendency to romanticize all or almost all aspects of it as liberative. Then these are used in the construction of Christian theology as if they have an innate liberative potential. A closer attention to context would show that this is not nec-

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Berlinerblau, "Max Weber's Useful Ambiguities and Problem of Defining 'Popular Religion'", *op. cit.*, p. 613.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 617.

<sup>23</sup> Chung, Hung Kyung, "Popular Religion and the Fullness of Life: An Eco-Feminist Reflection", *op. cit.*

essarily the case. Popular religions share with all religions a basic fact. All religions have both a sinful and an enslaving aspect, as well as a soteriological and liberative aspect. It is important to discard the first and learn from the second. A general romanticization of any religion, including popular religions, can be misleading.

It is important when dealing with a popular religion not to place simple value judgements on any of the agents at play in creating and practising it, or on a popular religion as a whole. In her article, "Creating Dangerous Memory", Kang Nam-Soon warns against so romanticizing and idealizing some liberating aspect within a traditional culture that we fail to see the dehumanizing forces at work within that culture. For example, it may be easy to co-opt Asian female deities as a means of liberating us from patriarchy in Christianity, but do so without taking seriously into consideration the function the same deities perform in fulfilling patriarchal expectations in the traditions they inhabit.<sup>24</sup> Feminist scholars have been tempted to look at goddess figures, such as Kali, who is a popular religious figure in India, as a powerful female archetype. Unfortunately, not enough consideration has been given to the context in which such figures as Kali are used, and how they have affected the situation of women in that context.

Worship of the goddess in India tends to be predominantly a male enterprise, and in the case of Káli, part of a violent culture, such as the thuggie culture in the south of India. These men worship the goddess as mother and dismiss mere mortal women as unable to live up to those expectations. At the same time, in an ironic way, the dangerous and unpredictable creative power that is attributed to the goddess is transferred to the depiction of mortal women, so that men feel that women have to be controlled and tamed. As a result, the goddess figure, though powerful in itself, has not aided women. Rather, it has been used either to marginalize women or to control them. When invoking the goddess figure to deal with patriarchy, one must pay attention to the way the figure is used in its original context. Otherwise, the potential exists for the figure to be used in a similar negative manner in the new context.

## Implications for doing theology

There are two characteristics of popular religions that are helpful in the construction of Christian theology, and have implications for Christian mission. First, popular religions focus on life in this world. They attempt to negotiate with life and the joys, the stresses and the losses that are part of human existence. In the process, symbols, images and rituals are created. These are neither to be dismissed as irrelevant nor are they to be embraced totally as liberative. Both liberative and oppressive dimensions remain. Here I would like to give a

<sup>24</sup> Kang Nam Soon, "Creating Dangerous Memory: Challenges for Asian and Korean Feminist Theology", in *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 47, No 1, 1995, p. 29.



personal illustration. I remember as a young girl, when I became of age, many rituals and ceremonies surrounded my becoming a woman. I remember the cossetting I received particularly from the women in my family over the next few weeks. Great care was taken with my health, the food I was given to eat, the new adult cloths I was given to wear, and instructions on how to behave like a lady. I remember especially one beautiful ceremony where my mother and aunts took turns to pour milk, herbs and coins<sup>25</sup> over my head in a final ceremonial bath. After I bathed and had put on a completely new set of cloths, my face was covered and I was brought out into a room. As the cloth was lifted from my face, I saw a beautiful tall brass oil lamp, and the room was engulfed in the smoke of incense. Three of my mother's friends, whom I deeply admired, participated in the ceremony, and were given to me as guardians and people to emulate. It is one of my most precious memories of being loved and empowered as a woman. Yet, I know the purpose of all those rituals and the sudden attention paid to me in this tradition was because I finally had value as a woman who could bear children. The concern of the rituals, if not the people who participated in them, was on my womb and the sons it could bear, and the son-in-law whom it could produce. The empowering and oppressive aspects of those rituals live in bittersweet harmony in my memory. I cannot have one without the other, like much of various aspects of life.

Christian theology also has a strong this-worldly inclination. While the source of Christian theology is transcendent, it is its incarnational nature that gives it significance. It is God-with-us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. There is the activity of the Holy Spirit both in the world and in our lives. There is the manifestation of the reign of God in the here and now. All these make up the heart and soul of Christian theology. All this has implications for our missiological task.

Unfortunately, far too often Christian theology has emphasized an otherworldly soteriology that negates and dismisses this world. Consequently, Christian mission has been preoccupied with a salvation to come in "another world".

Through popular religions, Christianity could become more firmly rooted in a context. Dialogue with these religions would help provide a language to make the incarnational nature of the Christian message accessible. This dialogue needs to be carried out with discrimination so that liberative dynamics in both the Christian religion and the popular religions receive prominence, and oppressive dynamics are condemned.

Second, popular religions are by nature inclusive. Because these religions focus on this world, they take a strong interest in maintaining and in helping to maintain interactive harmonious relationships.

<sup>25</sup> Milk is used to symbolise feminine fertility and ability to nurture, herbs to ward off illness and bad spirits, and coins for prosperity.

By placing a strong emphasis on the creation there is an assumption in popular religions that for the human being to be whole and healthy, the creation needs to be whole and healthy. This ecological argument is not lost on Christian theology. Much work has been done in the area of the human being as steward of creation.<sup>26</sup> In dealing with the incarnational nature of the Christian faith, Christian theology would do well to be in conversation with popular religions in a specific context.

Popular religions also provide space for the marginalized of society. In a way, popular religions are saying that silenced voices have to be heard. Because of their close links with disenfranchised communities, popular religions have brought the non-privileged people of society into the theological conversation.

At a time when inclusion is becoming more important not only for our academic integrity but also for our very survival, popular religions push in a healthy direction. In a world bereft of peace, and torn apart by conflicts between "those within" and "those forced outside", and at a time when "enemy" images abound, popular religions call for the admission of greater pluralism and inclusion at one and the same time. If our theological constructions are not to be monologues but dialogues for life that includes all of creation, then our engagements in the study of popular religions could aid us in our theological, as well as our missiological tasks.

<sup>26</sup> Note such works as Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come Of Age*, New York, Eerdmans/Friendship Press, 1990.