

For Further Reading

Most publications listed in the references above contain good bibliographies. Perhaps the most extensive bibliography on the topic of forming indigenous theologies is found at the end of D. Bosch's *Transforming Mission* (1991). I suggest the following short list as a beginning guide.

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Popular Religions

Paul G. Hiebert

In a controversial book, Robert Ellwood (1989) argues that world religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam begin as high religions with clear universal visions and power to transform cultures, and gradually fade into folk religions focusing on immediate human needs and desires. Ellwood's thesis runs counter to the earlier theory that universal religions evolved from folk animism and are displaced eventually by science.

Neither theory, in fact, takes into account the continuing spread of high religions, on the one hand, and the persistence of folk religions in all human societies, on the other. Throughout the world, high religions coexist with folk religions. Folk Islam continues alongside orthodox Islam (Woodberry 1989), folk Hinduism beside philosophical Hinduism (Hiebert 1983), and folk Christianity with formal Christianity. The relationships between high and low religions are complex and often full of tensions, but neither has displaced the other. Nor have they been replaced by science.

For the most part, missiology has focused on the relationship of Christianity to other high religions and neglected the whole field of folk religions. As professionally trained leaders, missionaries have addressed their peers, the professional, theologically trained leaders in

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other religions, even though their missionary work was carried on primarily among the common folk. They assumed that village Muslims were orthodox Muslims, and that Hindus knew the doctrines of their faith. Mission was often seen as a confrontation between great religious systems.

The fact is that much of the religion of folk Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists center around everyday issues dealing with crises such as droughts and barrenness, healing, success, guidance, and accounting for the misfortunes they experience. Moreover, the church around the world is discovering that these same issues persist among Christian converts. Many young churches today are facing the problems of witchcraft, spirits, ancestors, magic, sorcery, evil eye, healing, exorcisms, divination, and the like. In fact, these are problems for Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist religious leaders as well as for missionaries and church leaders.

There is a growing awareness among mission leaders that these issues arising out of folk religions will be central in missiology in the twenty-first century. The issues can be divided roughly into two areas: those dealing with old folk religious practices, and those relating to the new church structures that are emerging around the world at the folk level. Before we examine these, we need to define what we mean by folk religions and examine their relationships to formal high religions.

High Religions and Folk Religions

By "high" religion, we mean the beliefs and practices associated with the great religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. These deal with the cosmic questions facing humankind regarding ultimate origins, the meaning and end of this world, of humankind, and of individual persons. They claim to be universally true for all humans. The caretakers of these visions are religious specialists who, for the most part, are literate. They interpret the sacred texts and debate orthodoxy.

Around these leaders are the central institutions of the religion: the great churches and temples that symbolize the movement; the seminaries where young leaders are trained; the bureaucratic organizations that control the movement; and the service organizations such as presses, schools, hospitals, and welfare agencies. Robert Redfield and Milton Singer (1954) refer to this core of a high religion as its "great tradition."

High religions also have their "little traditions," the local gatherings of lay followers who live their lives out in the world and have little knowledge of or time for the theological debates of the great tradition. High religion provides them with a sense of the cosmic story and their place in it.

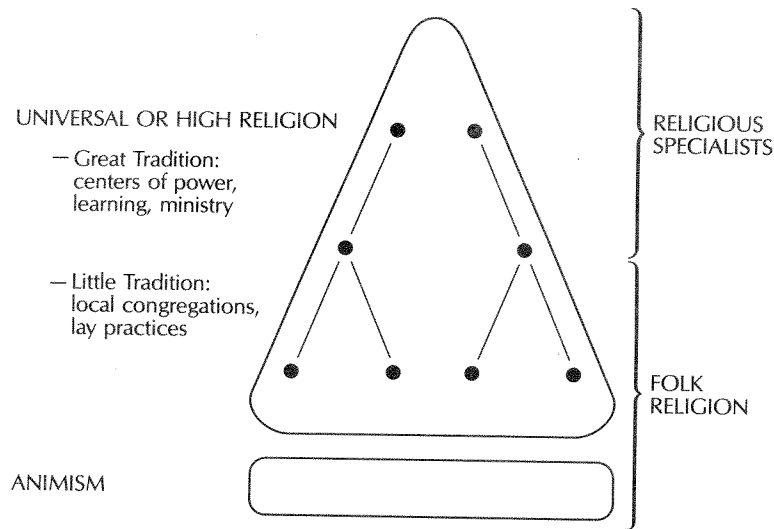
But high religions often leave unanswered the questions of everyday life. How can one prevent calamities such as drought and plagues? Why was it that *my* child died so suddenly? How can we guarantee success in crops or business? People know they need to care for their bodies to be healthy, and to plant and tend their fields to get crops. But when their folk sciences fail, what do they do? If their high religion provides no answers, they generally turn to animistic practices — to spiritism, witchcraft, and magic. For example, regarding raising crops, Malinowski writes,

Magic is undoubtedly regarded by natives as absolutely indispensable to the welfare of the gardens. . . . [The native] knows as well as you do that there are natural conditions and causes, and by his observations he knows also that he is able to control these natural forces by mental and physical effort. . . . On the other hand there is the domain of the unaccountable and adverse influences, as well as the great unearned increment of fortunate coincidence. The first conditions are coped with by knowledge and work, the second by magic. (1955:28-29)

Folk religion is an ad hoc mix of the local expressions of high religions and animism (see Figure 1, p. 256). It is a set of loosely related practices, often mutually contradictory, used not to present a coherent view of reality, but to produce immediate results. It provides various courses of action for those facing immediate problems such as drought, plagues, bad fortune, and sudden deaths; for those seeking success in love, farming, business, and school; and for those wanting guidance in making important decisions.

Clifford Geertz's analogy is useful here (1985). He compares folk religion to the inner part of an old city, with its narrow, winding streets, dark corners, and many little shops where there is often little apparent order, yet much is going on. People of many kinds crowd the lanes and fill the cafes with raucous laughter and animated gossip. High religion, on the other hand, is like the suburbs surrounding the inner city with their neatly-laid-out streets and spacious houses arranged in precise order. Here life is more sedate and peaceful, and sometimes those living here venture into the inner city for its excitement and color.

Figure 1. The Nature of Folk Religion



There are tensions between specialists in high religions and practitioners of folk religions. In Hinduism Brahmin priests despise the low caste shamans who perform blood sacrifices to village and nature spirits. In Islam the *mullas* reject the *fakirs* with their folk practices. Similarly, in Christianity pastors condemn magicians and witch doctors. The conflict, in part, arises out of the different nature and functions of high and folk religions (see Table 1, p. 257).

High and folk religion represent poles on a continuum, not distinct categories. Analysis of them is further complicated by the fact that many folk religious movements become established and begin to develop their own institutions. In the process they develop religious specialists, formal beliefs, and institutions, and through this process of institutionalization they become high religions.

With this framework of analysis, let us look at issues related to folk religion that are crucial in missions in the twenty-first century.

Unfinished Business in Missions

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many missionaries accepted unwittingly an evolutionary view of religion. In tribal societies

Table 1. A Comparison of High and Folk Religions

HIGH RELIGION	FOLK RELIGION
Ultimate reality: looks at things from a cosmic perspective.	Immediate realities: looks at things from a personal perspective.
Universalistic: believed to apply to all people.	Particularistic: applies to our specific group or selves.
Doctrinaire: concerned with truth and morality, with formal rationality and with internal logical consistencies.	Pragmatic: concerned with power and with solving immediate problems. Not logically consistent. Little formal rationalization.
Exclusive: claims full allegiance of the believer.	Inclusive: uses many mutually contradictory systems simultaneously.
Key Questions: ultimate origin, purpose, and end of this universe, our people, and myself.	Key Questions: meaning of a death for the living, how to avoid disasters, how to succeed, how to find guidance for daily decisions.

they condemned religious practices such as witchcraft, magic, ancestor veneration, and spiritism as "superstitions." Many assumed that these practices would simply die out as people became Christians and adopted modern science. Others believed that the church should forcibly stamp them out. For example, Dietrich Westermann, in his *Duff Lectures of 1935* (published as *Africa and Christianity*, 1937), said,

However anxious a missionary may be to appreciate and retain indigenous social and moral values, in the case of religion he has to be ruthless. . . . he has to admit and even to emphasize that the religion he teaches is opposed to the existing one and the one has to cede to the other. (1937:2)

The Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910 concluded that Africa's traditional religions contained "no preparation for Christianity" (World Missionary Conference 1910, Report of Commission IV, p. 24).

Tribals did become Christians in the millions. The superiority of the Christian teachings and the power of Western technology were self-evident to many. But tribal beliefs and practices did not die, nor were they stamped out. They simply went underground. Christian weddings in the church were followed by traditional weddings in the bush. Children continued to wear amulets, but hidden under their clothes.

The picture was different in peasant societies. There Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Shinto coexisted with various folk religions. Missionaries were aware that Christianity stood in direct confrontation with the high philosophical religions, so they studied them and consciously undertook the apologetic task. Few, however, studied the folk practices of the villages. Most assumed that these "superstitions" would fade, or could be stamped out by legalistic means. Latourette expressed this opinion when he wrote (1975:328), "A 'primitive' religion yields more readily to a 'high' religion than does a 'high' religion to another 'high' religion."

There are notable exceptions to this lack of interest in the religious practices of the common people rather than of the elite. In South India missionaries such as Elmore (1925) and Whitehead (1921) did pioneer work on village religion. In Africa Junod (1962) gave us in-depth analyses of tribal religions. In the Muslim world, Macdonald (1912) and Zwemer (1920, 1939) wrote definitive works on folk Islam.

In part, the missionaries in peasant societies were successful. Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims became Christians and left their temples, shrines, and mosques. But the old folk religious practices continued, generally in secret for fear of missionary rebuke. Farmers continued to protect their crops from the evil eye by placing pots covered with spots in the field. Patients came to mission hospitals, but stopped on the way to visit the magician, astrologer, and diviner.

It is clear today that folk religious beliefs and practices remain an unfinished agenda in the lives of young churches around the world. Christian converts found in the gospel the way of ultimate salvation, but the church often had few answers to their immediate questions about sickness, witchcraft, spirits, guidance, and success. So they returned to their old ways for answers to these questions, even as they went to church for forgiveness and fellowship with God. When the missionaries and church leaders condemned them for doing so, they simply continued in secret.

Issues related to folk religion are surfacing in young churches around the world. Witchcraft, sorcery, spirits, ancestors, magic, drums, dances, and traditional life-cycle rites are once again living issues that church leaders must confront. The debate surrounding these issues has been heated.

Nowhere is this more true than in Africa. In the Catholic Church this is seen in the Vatican's response to Bishop Milingo (1984), and in the writings of Aylward Shorter (1985). In Protestantism, Mulumba (1988) and others have wrestled with the problem. Kwame Bediako, in

his analysis of the roots of African theology, goes so far as to say (1989: 59),

There is probably no issue more crucial than the need to understand this heightened interest in the African pre-Christian religious tradition if Africa's theologians are to be interpreted correctly and their achievement duly recognized. What is the explanation for the extraordinary fact that the very religious traditions that were previously deemed to be of scant theological significance should now come to occupy "the very centre of the academic stage"?

Regarding African theologians, Andrew Walls observes (1981:49),

Each . . . was trained in theology on a Western model, but each has moved into an area for which no Western syllabus prepared him, for each has been forced to study and lecture on African traditional religions — and each has found himself writing on it.

The same picture is emerging elsewhere around the world. In Latin America, despite two centuries of Christian presence, the central struggle of the church today is with Umbanda, Candomblé, Xango, and other types of spiritism. In India, P. Luke and J. Carmen (1968) trace the impact of folk religious practices on village churches.

Issues raised by folk religions are not only the unfinished business of missions, they are also increasingly the concern of the Western church. Despite a centuries-long battle against witchcraft and paganism, the church in North America today faces the revival of neopaganism and the emergence of new folk religions loosely referred to as the New Age (Groothuis 1986). Like folk religions elsewhere, these are concerned primarily with the existential problems of everyday life.

Responding to traditional folk religions has never been a simple task in the history of the church. Despite the papacy's continuing opposition, witchcraft, magic, sorcery, and other folk religious practices persisted for more than a thousand years in the European church. In some ways the Reformation was as much a reaction to the inroads of pagan folk religious practices into Christianity, such as the selling of amulets and merits, as it was to the theological teachings of the Roman church. The same picture is true in Latin America where the coexistence of orthodox Catholicism with syncretistic folk practices has undermined the power of the church.

What should the churches' response be to these folk practices?

They will not simply die out, nor can we stamp them out by law and discipline. On the other hand, we cannot accept them uncritically in the church. To do so leads to Christo-paganism (Nida 1961).

The church must consciously deal with folk religious beliefs and practices, using the process of critical contextualization (cf. Hiebert 1987). First, it must study the beliefs and practices without rejecting them outright in order to understand them and the questions they answer. Then the church must test them in the light of biblical teaching. Some practices will be kept, some rejected, some reinterpreted, and new ones created to express new Christian beliefs. Finally, those that are accepted must be integrated as meaningful practices into the life of the church.

One model of this critical response to traditional religious practices is the way God dealt with them in the Old Testament. Many, such as idolatry, human sacrifice, magic, divination, and necromancy, were strictly prohibited. Others, such as altars, the offering of sacrifices, washing of the body, bowing in prayer, numerous birth, wedding, and funeral customs, and words such as *El* (God), *chatta'ah* (sin), and *ga'al* (to redeem) were given new meanings in the context of new teachings and rituals.

The same model is found in the response of Jesus and the early church to the folk religious practices of that day. Jesus used saliva and laid hands on people, but he condemned magical approaches to power and refused to perform signs and wonders as ends in themselves (Matt. 12:38-39; Luke 23:8-9; John 6:14-15). Peter used handkerchiefs, but cursed Simon for wanting to use religious power for personal ends (Acts 8:9-24).

In both models it is clear that God neither rejected nor accepted old practices uncritically. He offered something that transcended the old categories altogether, and served to judge them. The gospel relativizes all religious practices, for they must be judged by it.

It is not our purpose here to predetermine the outcome of these debates arising out of the church's confrontation with traditional folk religions. The very process by which churches seek to understand God's voice in their specific religiocultural contexts is essential to their growth in discernment and maturation in faith. Rather, our purpose here is to note that these issues remain an unfinished business in the life of the church around the world that will require its immediate attention in the twenty-first century, and that this process of reevaluating the church's response to traditional religions has already begun in many places. Moreover, our purpose is to note the great potential in the life

of the church for dealing with these issues, since it will help the church speak again to the common folk. There is also, however, a great danger of new forms of syncretism. Throughout history, the church has suffered as much from syncretism at the level of folk religion as from heresy at the level of high religion.

Discerning New Church Structures

Another set of issues related to folk religion that will play a central role in the missiology of the twenty-first century has to do with the structures of the church. By the end of this century sixty percent of the church will be in the non-Western world, and most of this sixty percent will be among the poor who cannot afford paid ministers and large institutions. For the most part, missionaries in the past have brought the professional models of ministry they knew in the West. Today young churches are struggling with these models and looking for other models that enable the church to survive and multiply among the poor and oppressed.

The question is not new to the church. As Yoder points out (1987), Christianity began as a movement among the common people. The early church had no professional religious elite that ruled over an obedient laity. Every Christian was to be a priest, not only theologically, but also in the organizational life of the church. Every member had a gift (*charisma*), which she or he was to use for the good of the congregation, and all gifts were to be valued in the church (I Cor. 12 and Rom. 12). Francisco Lepargneur of São Paulo notes (Hollenweger 1968:167),

... according to St. Paul the supernatural quality is not the criterion which distinguishes the charismatic. . . . Rather Paul subsumes under the term charisma such ordinary things as almsgiving, exercising leadership, teaching (Rom. 12:6-8), marriage or celibacy (1 Cor. 7:7).

In short, the early church was more folk than professional in its organization.

Yoder (1987) points out that the early church soon abandoned the idea of universal ministry in favor of a professional leadership set apart from the laity. The result was the establishment of a clerical monarchy. The process was complete after Constantine when Christianity was wedded to the Roman state, and church leaders became part of the government. Since then the churches, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Cath-

olic, and Protestant alike, have built their organizations of professional clergy who are separate from the laity.

This hierarchical model of church organization is being challenged today on the frontiers where the church is growing rapidly. In many parts of the world it is simply impossible, numerically and economically, to train enough professional leaders to meet the needs of the exploding church. Moreover, much of the young church cannot afford elaborate organizational structures. Consequently, new forms of church organization have emerged to meet the needs of this rapid growth.

One such form appeared earlier in the congregationalism of the early Baptists, Anabaptists, Disciples, Methodists, and Pentecostals. For example, the lay Methodist circuit riders and Baptist "farmer-preachers" of the American mission frontier provided much of the leadership that was reserved for the professional clergy of other churches. Similarly, the early Pentecostals built their churches with a minimum of professionalization. Lay leaders grew in the use of their gifts, and lay men and women went out to begin new churches. Consequently, their expansion was not strangled by the lack of professionally trained leaders on whom many other missions and churches depended.

A second form of "folk church" to emerge has been the "independent churches." These have emerged in Africa, India, and other parts of the world. Whereas mission churches have been heavily dependent upon expatriate missionaries and highly trained nationals, the independent churches have relied, for the most part, on lay, uneducated leaders. The flexibility such leadership gives them to identify with the local culture and to address the issues of folk religion such as witchcraft, spirit possession, ancestor veneration, and magic, has facilitated rapid growth on the frontiers of the independent churches.

A third form of laity-based church has emerged in the Catholic Church in the form of "base communities." A generation ago sociologically informed church leaders in Central and South America realized that the existing structures could never provide enough priests, trained and ordained, to meet the needs of the church. New structures were needed to minister to the masses and the poor. Consequently, the leaders created the role of "delegates of the Word," modestly trained and formally authorized teachers of basic Christian knowledge. For the most part these base leaders were able by cultural affinities to communicate with their poor peers better than a fully "qualified" expatriate priest ever could. At first they gave catechetical instruction. Later the *delegados de la Palabra* led in meetings for prayer, Bible study, consciousness-raising,

and community development. The result was simple Christian communities that sprang up in such places as rural Brazil and in the mountainous countryside of Central America.

Parallel to this, those working among the parishes of the urban poor realized that there would never be enough priests to go around. The bishops began to authorize the organization of neighborhood lay groups, meeting with a priest to read the Scriptures and lead prayers, to organize around community needs, and to develop the skills of community process and leadership. Yoder notes (1987:98),

Leadership roles are freed to evolve ad hoc in the power of the Spirit, accrediting already recognized natural giftedness, discerning through the leaders' effectiveness in facilitating consensual decision processes, regardless of sex (at least at the *barrio* level), or formal education.

Out of these two movements have emerged what have come to be called "base ecclesial communities." In recent years these have sprung up in great numbers throughout Latin America, and in parts of Africa and India (Cook 1985).

Similar, in some ways, to the base communities are the many Bible study groups and house churches springing up in many parts of the world.

Are these various forms of "folk churches" a restoration of the New Testament church pattern? The answer is yes and no. In one sense they represent returns to the more flexible, laity-based structures of the early church. Some argue that this is a form of primitivism that characterizes most movements at their birth, and that it is peripheral to the concerns of the gospel. Yoder responds (1987:87),

When the entire outline of the Epistle to the Hebrews centers around the end of the priesthood, when in 1 Corinthians 12 to 14 the central theme is the multiplicity of gifts in the church, and when in Ephesians 4 this unity in multiplicity is in fact referred to as "the perfection of Christ," it would seem obvious that the apostolic interpretation of the meaning of multiplicity of ministries forbids our treating the matter as merely a temporarily fitting solution to a pragmatic question of optimum social management.

Yet each of these attempts has failed to capture fully the biblical vision of the church. The Baptist, Anabaptist, Pentecostal, and other congregational movements have, over time, institutionalized their

structures and reinstated a professional clergy. The independent churches range from thoroughly Christian to neoprimal in their theologies (Turner 1981), and many have strong "father" or "chief" leaders rather than a multiplicity of leaders. The base communities are not permitted by the Catholic Church to administer the sacraments, and so are incomplete in their churchly functions.

Nevertheless, these new forms, born out of the missionary outreach of the church, give us some idea of what much of the church of the twenty-first century might look like. Given the rapid changes taking place in the world, that church will need to be flexible. Given the growing persecution of Christianity in some lands, that church will need to survive underground with a minimum of structures. Given the fact that many of the churches will be in the Two-Thirds world among the poor, those churches will need to survive and evangelize without large budgets and complex institutions.

Missions have always challenged the *status quo* of the church, and forced it to ask new questions and seek new forms. In the twenty-first century, many of the questions and forms the church will face relate to God's work among the common people, particularly those in the young churches planted by the missionary movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The outcome may be the reinvention of the church (Schlabach 1989), the emergence of new syncretistic forms of Christianity, or both.

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IV. Special Challenges in Mission