

## THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO FOLK RELIGIONS

What response should we give to folk religious beliefs and practices? Clearly we must take them seriously. To reject them as unreal or to condemn them as all demonic without providing Biblical answers to the questions they seek to solve will only drive such beliefs and practices underground.

We must have a three-step response:

1. **Phenomenological:** we must study local folk religious beliefs and practices in order to understand them, and their power over the people.
2. **Theological-Ontological:** after a careful, non-judgmentive examination of the folk religious beliefs and practices, we must evaluate them in the light of Biblical theology and objective reality testing.
3. **Missiology:** knowing where people are, and where the Gospel is, we need to examine ways of helping the people move from where they are to where they should be in their beliefs and practices. Some changes are required at conversion (such as burning of fetishes). Others may be left to spiritual growth and discipling.

The first of these steps must be carried out by research in each local area. There are general principles that can be formulated for steps two and three.

### 1. Past Theological Answers

The church has struggled with the problem of dealing with middle level questions in the past and come up with many different answers.

- 1.1 The early church secularized Greek demonology, but came up with its own theology of evil, ancestors, and spirits.
- 1.2 Angels and Saints: these were used in the middle ages to deal with everyday human problems.
- 1.3 Providence: there was a renewed emphasis by the reformers on the presence of God in the everyday human lives.
- 1.4 Indwelling presence of Christ: this was the emphasis of the pietists.
- 1.5 Work of the Holy Spirit. This was stressed by the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements.

### 2. Proposed Theological and Missiological Response to Folk Religion

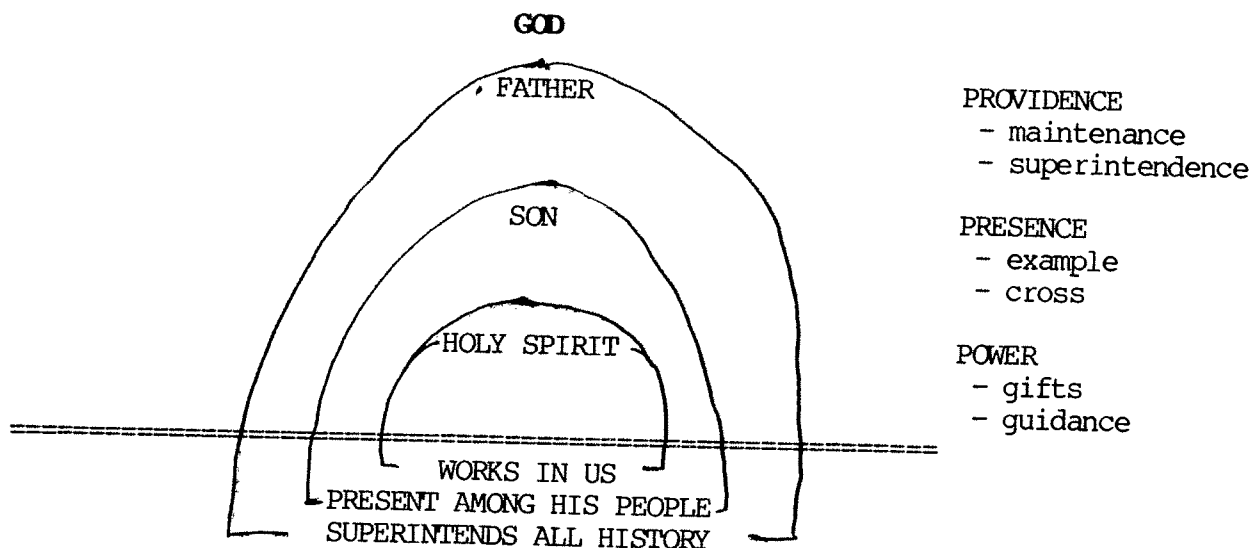
It is clear that we need a biblically based theology that deals with the questions asked at the level of folk religion if we wish to minister to many in tribal, peasant and urban societies. These questions may not be as important as ultimate questions, but unless we answer them, new Christians will continue to go to witchdoctors and shamens for answers.

What are some of the theological affirmations we can make regarding God's work in the everyday lives of people?

2.1 Based on a Theology of the Trinity:

We need to emphasize the ongoing, everyday work of all three members of the trinity in our lives.

**FIGURE I**  
**A TRINITARIAN VIEW OF GOD'S WORK IN OUR EVERYDAY LIVES**



2.11 Father: The Father maintains the universe, and superintends all history. Therefore, for the Christian, everything that happens is for our good, whether that is joy or suffering, health or sickness. Often sickness draws us closer to God than does health. Poverty and hardships force us to depend on God, not on ourselves.

2.12 Son: The Son is ever present with us. He shows us the Father. He is our example. His power is that of the cross which defies the wisdom of the world, and the powers of the world.

2.13 Spirit: The Spirit is in all of God's people. He shows us the Son (twice he is referred to as the Spirit of Jesus). He never leads us contrary to the example of Christ. He gives us gifts and indwells us, giving us power to live in this world still suffering under the curse of sin.

2.2 Based on a Theology of a Whole Gospel

In order to bring a whole Gospel, we must "bring God back into" all three levels of questions people ask.

**Figure II**  
**A WHOLE GOSPEL**

GOD	THEOLOGY OF:
COSMIC HISTORY	CREATION, REDEMPTION, PURPOSE, ESCHATOLOGY
HUMAN HISTORY	GUIDANCE, HEALING, PROVIDING
NATURAL HISTORY	CREATION, SUSTENANCE

(1) We need a theology of cosmic history that answers questions of the origin, meaning and destiny of the world, of societies and of individuals. (2) We need a theology of human history that deals with questions of divine guidance, healing, provision, and protection. (3) We need a theology of natural history that sees the natural order as part of God's activity. If we do not in our thinking bring God back into the center of the natural order, we will secularize the world, for the world is buying our medicine and sciences. As Newbigin points out, in the past Christian missions has been the greatest secularizing force in history. We need a theology of science.

2.3 Based on a Balance of Organic and Inorganic Realities

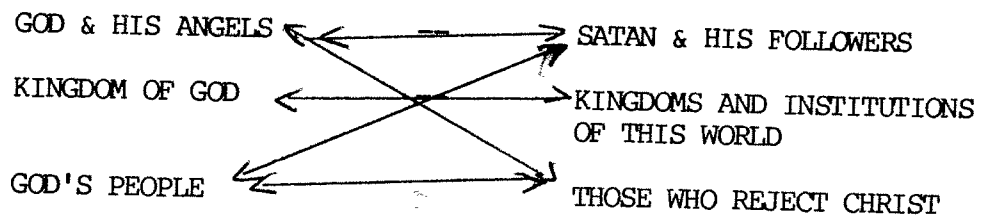
The West has been captivated largely by a mechanistic world view. We need to return to a theology that returns to a balance between organic and inorganic realities. The stress in theology is on God and humans, and therefore on organic relationships. There is a danger in the social sciences of seeing humans from a mechanistic point of view, of treating them as machines. In a mechanical world view humans are gods for they control the world through magic. We need a relational theology that sees the world and God in organic and personal terms. Such theology begins with worship of God in which we recognize Him as God and place ourselves and wishes under his control. It continues in a fellowship with one another that recognizes the oneness of the body of Christ, and the dignity of all humans because they are created in the image of God.

2.4 Based on an Incarnational Model of Missions

We come with our own understanding of the world. We need to understand the world view of the people to whom we go. We need to understand the questions they ask, and the answers they have given. Then we need to provide them with a holistic theology, a Christian answer to each of these questions. It is not enough to suppress old practices. We need to provide a better way.

2.5 Based on a Biblical View of Spiritual Warfare:

The greater history within which we live is that of God's war against Satan and his aides, and against sin and its consequences. This operates at several levels:



2.51 God has defeated Satan. We are living during the 'mop-up' of that battle. Satan has no real power of God's people, except as they yield to temptations. The Good News in tribal and peasant societies is that as Christians we are freed from the fear of the spirits. What power they have over us is only at the permission of God.

2.52 The Kingdom of God replaces the kingdoms, institutions, social systems and political structures of this world.

- **archon** and **arche**: tr. 'Powers'. These terms refer almost exclusively to systems, structures, institutions and, above all, to states, and to the incumbents that rule them. They refer to 'rulership', 'authority', 'princedom', 'administration', 'empire', 'supreme commander', etc. **Archon** is itself used more than 630 times in the Old Testament (LXX), and is focused solely on human affairs with the exception of Daniel 10 and 12 which refer to hostile and helpful "princes". In normal Greek the terms are used primarily in connection with human institutions, social structures and nation states. In the New Testament the terms normally refer to human orders, but in some cases they refer to heavenly powers (I Pet. 3:22), and of Satan and his rule (Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15, John 12:31, 14:30; 16:11 and Eph. 2:2
- **exousia**: tr. 'Authority'. Used 59 times in O.T., usually to humans, occasionally to God, but never to angels or demons or other spiritual powers.
- **Dynamis**: tr. 'Power'. The most frequent use of **dynamis** in Judaism is for earthly power: especially military 'forces.' Josephus gives us the meaning of the term in the 1st century as:
  - a) military power: armed forces, army, garrison, crew, infantry.
  - b) economic: wealth, resources, means, support.

- d) theological: God's might, power, rule, authority, providence.
- e) political: superiority, authority, influence, office, tyranny.
- f) rhetorical: eloquence, rhetoric, power of speech.
- g) general: power, ability, vitality, strength, energy, capacity.

- The O.T. (LXX) uses dynamis 594 times; with the exception of its use to translate "sabaoth" = 'hosts', a military term, all other uses are for attributes of God or for human power. In the N.T. it is primarily used to denote spiritual entities or attributes. There is surprisingly little use of **dynamis** for evil powers in the N.T. considering its popularity in that sense in the next centuries. It refers primarily to the power of God (Matt. 26:64, Mark 14:62), Christ (I Cor. 1:24), Holy Spirit (Eph. 3:20); and to authority over spirits (Luke 9:1, Rev. 13:2, etc.) [For a good discussion of 'The Powers' see Walter Wink, Naming the Powers and Unmasking the Powers; Heinrich Schlier, Principalities and Powers in the N.T.; H. Berkhof, Christ and the Powers; and J. H. Yoder, The Politics of Jesus.] It is clear from the Bible that human systems, institutions, nations and structures can be evil and in opposition to God. We need to take institutional and cultural sins seriously in confronting sin.

2.53 Individuals: On this level we are sinners, and make gods of ourselves. Self-possession is a greater danger than spirit-possession. Also on this level, those who are God's people are His agents for extending the Kingdom of God on earth.

2.6 Based on a Biblical view of Power: We must understand power in the Biblical sense of the term. Christ demonstrated his power in miracles as a sign that the Kingdom of God had broken into history. But he did not use power in a triumphal or entertaining way.

- at his temptation, he refused to use miracles to bring the world to his feet, or to make bread for his own comfort and wellbeing.
- before Herod he refused to perform a miracle to satisfy someone's curiosity.
- when the Pharisees wanted him to do a sign to show his messiahship, he refused (Matt 12:38).
- on the cross he refused to do a miracle to avoid redemptive suffering.

Paul makes it clear that the power of the Gospel is in the Cross, not in miracles (I Cor. 1:22-25, etc).

Suffering more often than wellbeing leads to spiritual growth and our dependence on God. We are still in our old bodies, and in times of wellbeing, we often forget God.

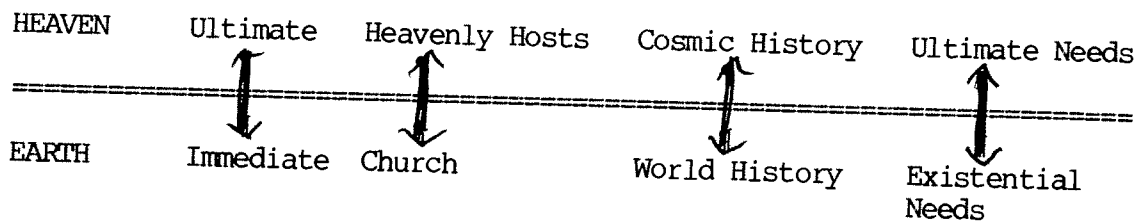
The church has grown much under persecution. Latourette points out that the early church grew through its dignity and joy in the midst of suffering. The same was true during the reformation. Lyell attributes the current growth of the church in China largely to its sufferings.

Power in the Kingdom of God is also linked to **servanthood**. It is not tied to domination, or to esteem, reputation and honor. For the Christian, power and leadership should lead to the growing honor of God and a decreasing praise of the leader.

## 2.7 Based on a Biblical balance between ultimate and immediate concerns:

We face both ultimate issues (salvation, relationship to God, our inheritance) and immediate issues (health, provision, liberty, development, etc). We need to keep the priorities right: salvation is more important than earthly wellbeing, holiness is more important than health, etc.

C. S. Lewis compares this to a drama in which the actor on stage must deal with two realities: the onstage reality, and the off-stage reality. The latter is more 'really real'.



## 2.8 Based on a Theology of Discernment:

There are no phenomena that are uniquely Christian. Power, miracles, healings, speaking in tongues, resurrections from the dead and other religious manifestations are found in most or all religions. The Bible makes it clear that in the end time Satan will counterfeit the power of God and lead many astray. The critical issue, therefore, is discernment (see article on discernment).

The Bible warns that in the end times the great issue will not be demonstrations of power, but discernment - by whose power are these signs done (2 Tim 3:12, 4:3, Col. 2:8, 1 Tim. 4:1-2, I John 4:1, 2:26, 3:7, 2 Thes. 3:2, etc). Christ makes it clear that not all who do signs and wonders will enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 7:21-23). Some of the tests are:

- 2.81 Does It Give the Glory to God rather than to Humans? (John 7:18, 8:50, 12:27-28, 17:4)
- 2.82 Does It Recognize the Lordship of Christ? (I John 2:3-5, 5:3, James 2:14-19).
- 2.83 Does It Agree with the Scriptures?
- 2.84 Does It Show the Fruit of the Spirit? (Gal 5:22-25. Luther pointed out that the difference between magicians and Christians is the transformation that takes place in the lives of the latter. Compare Matt. 7:1527 and 25:3145).
- 2.85 Does It Lead to Spiritual Maturation (I Cor. 12: - 14:)
- 2.86 Does It Keep Truth in Balance? (Matt. 23:2324).
- 2.87 Does It Seek the Unity of the Body of Christ? (John 17:11, I John 2:9-11, 5:1-2)

3. **Dangers in Dealing with Folk Religion:** We face real dangers in dealing with the questions of folk religion, namely the dangers of adopting the ways of the world and of seeking to win by its means.

3.1 The Danger of a new Christian Magic: In magic we seek to coerce God to do our will. In worship we submit ourselves to God that his will be done.

Magic is characterized by several things. It emphasizes formulas, and a formula approach that says, if you do it the right way it will work. When our prayers are not answered as we wish, do we accept it as God's will or blame it on doing something wrong?

Some say that if you add "nevertheless, not our will, but yours be done" to the end of a prayer, it may not work. This is a formula approach. We would rather have God's will be done than to be healed, liberated or supplied with material goods.

The contrast is:

<u>GOD CENTERED</u>	<u>SELF CENTERED</u>
Religion	Magic
Worship	Selfish Goal
Submission	Control
Prayer	Formulas
Cross	Success
Sacralizes the Secular	Secularizes the Sacred
Organic and Relational	Mechanistic and Impersonal

We do not come with a new and stronger magic. If we do, later when a newer and stronger magician arrives, the people will leave us. Christ calls all magical approaches into question and condemns them.

3.2 The Danger of a New Secularism: To the extent we emphasize that God works through miracles, we reinforce a dualistic world view in which science and human achievement are set in opposition to the supernatural work of God. In such a situation, although in the short run we glory in the miracles, in the long run science and secularism win out. We dare not set in opposition what God does and what humans do. We must see that God works in all things, both natural and extraordinary. For this reason I do not like to use the word 'supernatural' and 'natural' (both Greek, not Hebrew words). The biblical terms are 'creator' and 'creation'. There is no word in Hebrew for 'natural'. I would rather use the terms ordinary and extraordinary. God is at work in both.

- provision: God normally sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. He also provides in extraordinary ways for saints and sinners.
- healing: God is at work wherever healing is at work, in hospitals as well as in prayer sessions. We need to get away of the stress on miraculism. We do not need miracles to prove God's presence (I Cor. 1:22-26).

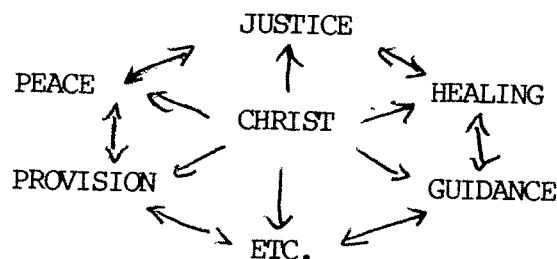
3.3 The Danger of a Misplaced Focus: The Biblical term "sign" technically means "omen" = anything that reminds us that God is present in a situation. The purpose of a sign is to point beyond itself, not to itself. Therefore, if God grants us a sign, we should not focus on the sign, but on what it says to us, on what lesson we must learn from it. We must be careful not to focus on extraordinary provision or healing as an end in itself, but to ask ourselves what God is saying to us through it.

The term "sign" refers most commonly to natural events. In the O.T. about 75-80% of the time the words used for 'sign' (mowpeth, pala and owth) refer to such things as the regular rotation of the sun and moon (Gen. 1:14), the rainbow (Gen 9:12), the blood placed by the Israelites on the door posts during the passover (Ex. 12:13), the sabbath (Ex. 31:13), a pile of rocks (Jos. 4:6), circumcision, and the death of children in the rebuilding of Jericho. The same is true in the N.T. for the terms **semion**, **dynamis** and **teras**.

Signs often come at important junctures or 'hinge-points' in our lives. They are not given to us as a daily diet. If we make them part of our daily routine, they soon lose their impact. We are then in danger of trivializing the message, and of exphasizing the existential over the ontological.

3.4 The Danger of Institutionalizing Immaturity: God communicates with us on the level of our spiritual maturity. In our early faith he may use 'fleece', blindly pointing to a verse in the Bible, dreams or signs. As we mature we no longer depend upon external supports for our faith in God. It comes from a deep inner walk with God which sustains us even when God does not show himself to us directly, or when we are in suffering or persecution.

Immaturity also leads us to unbalanced Christian lives. If Christ is the center, we will be concerned with provision, healing, justice, guidance, peace and so on. We lose our balance when any one of these grows out of proportion. It is easy to focus on provision and healing for these are to our benefit. It is harder to focus on the struggles for peace and justice for these often cost us much.



3.5 The Danger of Narcisism and a Health and Prosperity Cult based on the Standards of the World: Modernity looks for health, wealth and

success. It is self-centered - 'me-ism'. Too often as a church we buy into those values as they are measured in the world. We overlook the fact that in the Kingdom of God these are measured in radically different ways.

Folk religion around the world basically seeks immediate material and physical wellbeing. There is no place in it for suffering, pain, or the cross. Nor is success measured in heavenly terms rather than earthly terms. Success in the Bible is measured in terms of holiness, servanthood, sacrifice, and the cross.

Folk religion also centers around ourselves and our group. It looks to our own wellbeing, and forgets the thousands starving in other parts of the world, the millions living under oppression, the violence and hostility that rule the world. How do we answer those who ask about a God that heals us but does not seem to be present with the millions suffering around the world - many of whom are Christians.

This approach is also in danger of denying death. The great human question is still death. Sickness is inextricably intertwined with it. A success and prosperity theology seeks to deny death. A biblical theology accepts death as the door from the stage of human history to a greater reality. There are few testimonies so great as that of a peaceful death in the joy of the Lord. This is a powerful testimony in other religions which have no answer to death, and in which there is weeping and anguish when someone dies. Ours is a message of hope and triumph in the face of death.

- 3.6 The Danger of Generating a False Sense of Failure and Guilt: It is easy to handle cases where God answers our prayers the way we ask him, but how do we respond when he answers in ways other than our requests? What do we say when we pray for healing and a person dies or remains sick? If healing occurs, the healer is honored, if it does not, the patient is blamed for lack of faith. This generates a great deal of false guilt and a sense of failure which is unbiblical. In prayer, we seek God's will for ourselves and others, and we must be open to the fact that we do not see things clearly, and that God may answer in ways we do not understand, but are the best for us in the long run. It is those who God does not heal who need our support and prayers the most, that they be able to bear up in their suffering. Much of the great Christian literature, and the greatest hymns were born out of suffering, not out of wellbeing.
- 3.7 The Danger of Worshipping the Leader: We must always be careful lest we exalt the leader. In modernity, great leaders are our heroes. In the Bible, leaders who exalt themselves, or are exalted by their people usually turn out to be false leaders.
- 3.8 The Danger of Confusing Phenomenology with Ontology: We must always distinguish between phenomenology and ontology: While we begin by understanding people phenomenologically (both empirically and ethically) we need ultimately to test phenomenology to see what is true, and what is false. Not all human theories are correct, nor are all human observations accurate or true. We must test all experiences and beliefs against the best of our knowledge about reality.
- 3.9 The Danger of Buying into a Babylonian and Medieval Demonology: We are in danger of adopting a Babylonian theology of demonology. This



came into the Jewish world through the exile, and is widespread in the Jewish world in Kabala and other Jewish folk religious beliefs. The N.T. is notably free of the notions of demonic powers over God's people. It accepts the reality of demons, but they are defeated and dealt with mater-of-factly. We are delivered from their power. We should not be obsessed with them, nor see them in every phenomenon.

We are in danger of blaming our own evil on demons and so avoiding responsibility for our own sin. In the west we see less demon possession because people do not seek it so often. But we find much more self-possession. Making ourselves to be our own gods is still the cardinal sin, and self-possession is a greater danger to most of us in the west than demon possession.

We need also to give a greater emphasis on angels. We need to see them in our lives as those sent by God who assist us (see Billy Graham's book, Angels: God's Secret Agents).

3.10 Danger of Syncretism The Scripture warns us against the evils of compromise or substitution of Jehovah-worship by something else. See, for instance, the following: Ex. 20:1-7; 23:13,24,32-33; 22:20; Num. 24:1-3; 25:1-5; Josh. 24:14-28; 2 Kgs. 17:17ff; 1 Kgs. 18:; Deut. 32:17; 12:31; Ps. 106:37; Jer. 3:9, 13; 18-29:; Ezek. 8:5-18; 13:1-23; 16:20.

## COMMENTS

Frank Bartleman, associated with the 1907 Azusa Street Revival, wrote:

"We may not hold a doctrine, or seek an experience, except in Christ. Many are willing to seek power in order to perform miracles, draw attention and adoration of the people to themselves, thus robbing Christ of His glory, and making a fair showing in the flesh. The greatest need would seem to be for true followers of the meek and lowly Jesus. Religious enthusiasm easily goes to seed. The human spirit so predominates the show-off, religious spirit. but we must stick to our text - Christ.

"Any work that exalts the Holy Ghost or 'gifts' above Jesus will finally end up in fanaticism. Whatever causes us to exalt and love Jesus is well and safe. The reverse will ruin all. The Holy Ghost is a great light, but focused on Jesus always for His revealing.

"Where the Holy Ghost is actually in control, Jesus is proclaimed the Head - The Holy Ghost, His executive....

"The temptation seems to be toward empty manifestations. This does not require any particular cross, or death to the self-life. Hence it is always popular.

"We may not put power, gifts, the Holy Ghost, or in fact **anything** ahead of Jesus. Any mission that exalts even the Holy ghost above the Lord Jesus Christ is bound for the rocks of error and fanaticism.

"there seems to be a great danger of losing sight of the fact that Jesus was 'all in all.' The work of Calvary, the atonement, must be the center for our consideration. The Holy Ghost will never draw our attention from Christ to Himself, but rather reveal Christ in a fuller way. We are in danger of slighting Jesus - getting Him 'lost in the temple,' by the exaltation of the Holy Ghost and of the gifts of the Spirit. Jesus must be the center of everything."

David Wilkerson adds:

- We make Christ a stranger by giving the Holy Spirit pre-eminence over Him.
- We make Christ a stranger when we praise him, but do not pray to him. Today there is less praying in the congregation and in personal lives.
- We make Christ a stranger when we want his power more than his purity.