

Contextualization and Popular Religions

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Since the 1970s the question of contextualization has become a critical issue in missions. Compared to the earlier debates regarding the 'indigenization' of the church in new social structures (self-support, self-governance, self-reproducing), the issues involved in the 'contextualization' of the Gospel in new cultural forms are far more complex. Various terms such as translation, contextualization, and inculturation have been used to refer to the embodiment of the Gospel in new cultures. Behind them lies the deeper question of the relationship of the gospel to culture, to its translatability in different cultural forms. Lamin Sanneh points out that Christianity, and Protestantism in particular, are unique in that it affirms the radical view that its Gospel can be translated into all languages and cultures without losing its divine nature.

I will argue that translation and contextualization involve three assumptions. First, that there is a message is supracultural--we are speaking of a divine revelation, not human speculations. Moreover, this message is not captive to any of its cultural expressions. In other words, the Gospel cannot be equated with our western understandings of it. Second, this message must be expressed in cultural forms for people to heard and understand it. There is no supracultural way of communicating the Gospel to humans. This does not mean that the Holy Spirit does not work in the hearts of readers illuminating and interpreting the message, nor that God can and does reveal himself through visions. Even these, however, take place in cultural contexts, in the thought patterns and culturally accepted ways of the receiver. Third, the message is not simply information about truth, but calls us to respond to that truth. In other words, the

Gospel is always transforming the cultural context in which it is translated, calling it towards following Christ and transformation into God's way.

One area in which this tension between understanding the Gospel and responding to it is particularly important is in the religious beliefs of the common people. Those of us in positions of leadership in high 'religions' are trained to see religion in formal terms: in religious texts and commentaries, defined orthodoxies, churches, schools and other bureaucratic organizations, and priestly and prophetic leaders. For us, religion has to do with ultimate truth, and our concern is that the lay people learn and accept this truth. We are little aware of what the religious beliefs of the common people are, nor the questions they are seeking to answer in their lives. In missions, too, we have focused on the relationship of Christianity to other high religions and neglected the whole field of folk religions.¹ As professionally trained leaders we have addressed our peers, the professional, theologically trained leaders in other religions, even though our missionary work is carried on primarily among the common folk. We readily assume that village Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists are orthodox Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists who know their faith. Missions is often seen as a confrontation between great religious systems.

The fact is that much of the religion of folk Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists centers around everyday issues dealing with crises such as droughts and barrenness, healing, success, guidance, accounting for the misfortunes they experience, and looking for justice in ordinary

¹ Many, particularly Catholic scholars, speak of 'popular religion' in reference to the religious beliefs and practices of ordinary Christians. We will use the term 'folk religion' here in a technical sense as the religion of common folk which often includes the 'little tradition' of a high religion with a substratum of animistic beliefs. Folk religion is found in all societies. In tribal societies most religious beliefs and practices belong to this category. In peasant societies where high religions are present we find Folk Hinduism, Folk Islam, and Folk Christianity.

community relationships. Moreover, the church around the world is discovering that these same issues persist among Christian converts. Many young churches today are facing the resurgence of witchcraft, spirits, ancestors, magic, evil eye, healing, exorcisms, divination, and the like. These issues are central to the contextualization of the Gospel in the twenty-first century.

High Religions and Folk Religions

By “high” religion, we mean the belief 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 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 as they participate in the prescribed rituals.

But high religions often leave unanswered the questions of everyday life. What is the meaning of life here on earth when one is caught in meaningless drudgery to make a living? How can one prevent calamities such as droughts and plagues? Why did *my* child die 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 turn to animistic practices--to spiritism, witchcraft and magic.

Folk religion is an ad hoc mix of the local expressions of high religions and animism (figure 1). It is a set of loosely related practices, often mutually contradictory, used not to present a coherent true view of reality, but to produce immediate results. It provides various course of action for those facing immediate problems such as droughts, illnesses, bad fortunes, failures and sudden deaths; for those seeking success in love, farming, business, and school; for those wanting guidance in making important decisions; and for those seeking justice in an unjust world.

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 (table 1).

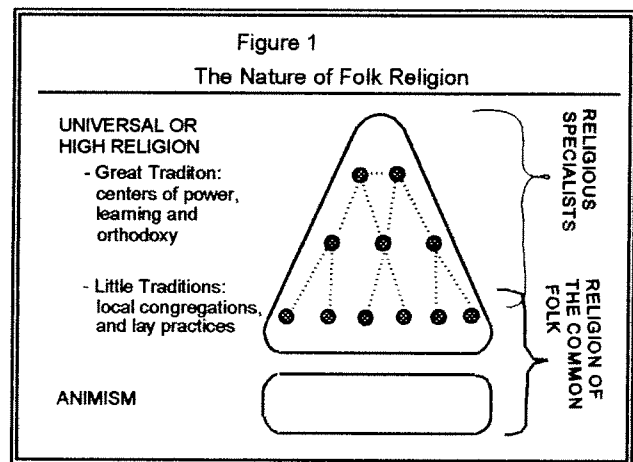


Table 1
A Comparison of High and Folk Religions

HIGH RELIGION	FOLK RELIGION
Ultimate reality: looks at things from a cosmic perspective.	Immediate existential 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 explanations systems simultaneously.
Key Questions: ultimate origin, purpose, and end of this universe, our people, and myself.	Key Questions: meaning of deaths for the living, how to avoid disasters, how to succeed, how to find guidance for daily decisions, and how to gain justice in everyday relationships.

High and folk religions 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, bodies of literature, formal beliefs, and institutions, and through this processes they become high religions.

With this framework of analysis in mind, let us look at issues related to the contextualization of the Gospel in folk religious contexts.

Unfinished Business in Missions

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many missionaries accepted unwittingly an evolutionary view of religion. In tribal societies 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 Mission 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. Christians 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 villagers. 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’ religions yields more readily to a ‘high’ religion than does a ‘high’ religion to another ‘high’ religion.”

In part, 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. 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 task in the contextualization of the gospel in the lives of young churches around the world. Christian converts turn to the Gospel for ultimate salvation, but the church often has few answers to their immediate questions of sickness, witchcraft, spirits, guidance, and success. So they return to their old ways for answers to these questions, even as they go to church for forgiveness and fellowship with God. When the missionaries and church leaders condemn them for doing so, they simply continue these practices in secret.

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 and Europe today face the revival of neopaganism and the emergence of new folk religions loosely referred to as the New Age. Like folk religions elsewhere, these are concerned primarily with power and 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, indulgences 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 spiritism and folk religious practices has undermined the power of the church.

Biblical Responses

What should the churches' response be to these folk practices? How do we contextualize the Gospel in such settings? 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.

The church must consciously deal with folk religious beliefs and practices, using the process of critical contextualization. First, it must study the beliefs and practices of folk religions without rejecting them outright. The purpose here is to understand them and the questions they seek to answer. Then the church must these 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 in the life of the church (Hiebert 1987).

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 alters, 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 teaching and rituals.

The same model is found in the response of Jesus and the early church to 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 see religious power as magical and to use it for personal ends (Acts 8:9-24). 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 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.

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