

# **Folk Religions**

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Most scholars trained in western schools define religion in terms of the formal, institutionalized religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, most of which claim universal application. These have sacred texts and commentaries, philosophical traditions and orthodoxies, professional leaders and schools, and organized churches, temples and mosques.

During the age of exploration, travelers, missionaries and colonial administrators encountered a great many oral religions around the world. These centered around rituals, myths, ancestors, spirits, witchcraft and magic, and were particularist in nature. Each tribe and people group had its own gods, and did not seek to convert other peoples to its beliefs.

The initial response of Western scholars was to see these oral religions as superstitions based on prelogical thought. They called these 'animism,' in contrast to 'religions' which they believed were logical and true. They assumed that when the high religions came, the people would abandon their superstitions. Consequently, Christian missionaries rarely took time to study the traditional religions, or to deal with them.

As missionaries and anthropologists began to study traditional religions, they found that underlying these are sophisticated conceptual systems that can be articulated by the philosophers in these societies. Moreover, they found that when traditional religionists became Christians, Hindus or Muslims, they did not abandon their old ways, but added high religious beliefs over the old leading to two tiered religions. While the leaders might be committed wholly to Islam or Hinduism, the common folk went to the mosque or temple to answer some questions, and to the shaman and witch doctor to answer other ones. Most converts were folk Muslims, or folk

Hindus. Christian missions faces the same problem of split-level religion. Lay Christians around the world go to churches on Sunday, but to traditional healers, exorcists, diviners and priest during the week. To understand this religion of the common folk, we need to examine the nature of formal and informal religion.

Formal religions deal with ontological questions regarding the ultimate origins, meaning and end of this world, of humankind, and of individual persons, which they affirm are universally true for all people. Most of the leaders are literate and develop sophisticated philosophical systems based on sacred texts to answer these questions, and are concerned that the lay people learn and accept these truths. Formal religions have local 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. They provide the people 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 existential questions ordinary people face in their everyday lives. What is the meaning of life here on earth when I am caught in meaningless drudgery to make a living? How can I prevent calamities such as illnesses and crop failures? Why did my child die so suddenly leaving no one to care for me in my old age? People know that 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 formal religion provides no answers, they turn to animistic practices--to magic, spirits, ancestors, divination, and other local religious practices.

Folk religions are ad hoc mixtures of local expressions of formal religions and local animistic beliefs and practices. They are sets of loosely related practices, often mutually

contradictory, used not to present a coherent true view of reality but to produce immediate results. They provide answers to the existential questions of everyday life. One is the meaning of life here on earth, and an explanation of death, not for those who die, but for those who remain behind and must deal with the grief and loss. A second is the desire for a good life, and the need to deal with the constant crises of life such as illness, spirit possession, droughts, famines, and defeats in battle. A third is the need to make everyday decisions regarding marriage, farming, business, hunting and raids, and the problem that much is unknown. A fourth is the desire for justice and social order, and the constant experiences of injustice, offense, and pollution. Folk religions provide people various courses of action to those facing illnesses, bad fortunes, sudden deaths, and failure in love and marriage, and guidance for those making important decisions.

The relationship between the leaders of formal religions and the animistic practices of their common followers is an uneasy one. In many cases, such as in Islamic fundamentalism, the leaders condemn them as heretical and seek to stamp them out, often by force. In other cases, such as in Hinduism, formal and local folk beliefs and rites are interwoven in complex accommodations. Tribal and local gods are absorbed into Hinduism by identifying them as incarnations of one of the high Hindu deities. Local rites are embedded in orthodox rituals, and goddesses and local spirits are enshrined under the trees and on the edges of Hindu temples.

Given this difference in focus, it should not surprise us that Christian missionaries and leaders trained in formal Christianity called people to eternal salvation, and often failed to address the everyday problems the people were facing. Consequently the people continued to go to traditional healers and diviners. In many cases, new converts knew that the leaders objected to their old ways, so they continued these practices in secret. Animistic beliefs and practices did not

die, nor were they stamped out. They simply went underground. The notable exception are the Independent Churches arising around the world which often seek to provide answers to the problems of everyday life.

Dealing with folk religious beliefs and practices remains an unfinished task in the contextualization of the Gospel in churches around the world, young and old. They often have few answers to the questions of sickness, spirits, witchcraft, ancestors and guidance, so Christians turn to their old ways for answers, even as they go to church for forgiveness and fellowship with God.

There is a growing awareness of the need for the Church to provide a whole Gospel that addresses both the ultimate and existential questions the common people face. It must present the Good News of forgiveness, salvation and reconciliation with God. It must also show that this Good News answers the everyday questions of the people. If it does not proclaim a whole gospel, lay folk will continue to come to the church for eternal salvation, but turn elsewhere to deal with the spiritual problems of everyday life. The result will continue to be a two tiered Christianity, which, in the long run, will make Christianity marginal in their lives, or turn it into Christo-paganism in which the Gospel becomes captive to the local culture and its worldview.

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