

Religion and Popular Religiosity in the Philippines

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Readers of these Inter-Religio bulletins will be familiar with: the question of engaging in dialogue with "folk" or "popular" religious traditions. Brendan Lovett, one of the circle of those working with tribal peoples in the Philippines amid trying to find with them a way to care for the earth as a primary religious reality, raises some interesting theoretical issues from: his experience.

It is very nearly impossible to find a piece of writing on popular religiosity at the present that does not manifest a note of condescension. This is true despite the fact that writers are divided into passionate defenders of popular religiosity and equally passionate detractors. The passionate defenders speak in moving but patronizing terms of safeguarding the faith of the simple faithful: the passionate detractors write off as stultifying any religious symbolism which falls outside their own limited range of comprehension.

Both sides share what I shall call the prejudice of the Enlightenment in regard to all that preceded that particular historical movement or fell, subsequently, outside its scope of influence. Since a crucial moment in the development of this particular ideology was the value set on book-learning, and since learning and education generally came to be reductively identified with schooling, all those whose consciousness has been shaped by schooling easily assume that what they have learned in school is unquestionably superior to, infinitely truer than, that understanding of things with which "the unschooled" have to manage.

I have already written an admittedly rather slim book dedicated to proving just why we should have second thoughts about this presumption.¹ As a result of that effort, I feel justified in the present context in making just a few summary assertions. The main reason why the presumption should be re-thought is that the most important part of anybody's learning owes nothing to the modern institutions which we call schools, colleges, and universities. I include within this most important part of what we know, of course, people's religious understand-

1. *Before Death: Life Before Death: Inculturating Hope* (Quezon City, 1986). The book attempts a comprehensive critique of modernity.

ing of life. Nobody ever became religious through schooling. Secondly, what schools have had to impart to people over recent centuries – the basis of our professional hubris – has been a very limited kind of knowledge, to do primarily with a quantitative appropriation of our world which easily led to technological mastery without facilitating in the least people’s grasp of the qualitative implications of such knowledge or such mastery. To the extent that people were schooled to pay more attention to what the school had to impart to them than they paid to their own experientially gained knowledge and the understanding mediated to them by the community, they were harmed.

Recent official Church documents reveal a new evaluation.² They have come to realize that faith is expressed in people’s religion in a form that is historically concrete, social, and cultural. The practices directly express people’s fundamental concern for meaning in life, suffering, and death and help to give a coherence and sense of direction to life. What it can result in is a harmonious well-balanced form of human existence which could well be envied by the schooled elites who, while seeing themselves as more developed, lack either the cosmic, natural feel for life or the historical-prophetic dimension, or both. Where people effect this historically concrete, social, and cultural integration of religious value in their own way, it can lead to “a harmonious form of existence which has been deep, experiential, satisfying, enjoyable, embracing life’s most intimate realities, material and sexual, and without any repressive Manichaeism or dualism. At the same time life has been structured, committed, liberating and critical.”³

This is not to say that there is no place for proclamation of the gospel, or that people should be just left to themselves. It is an insistent plea that the richness of past creative human living, enshrined in the language and traditions of a people, be seen as the soil in which the gospel must take root, the soil without which it cannot come to fruition in liberated human beings. It is to recognize that only people themselves can effect this creative transformation of their meanings. It is to recognize that the message of Judaeo-Christianity is a message articulated in limited historical form which, if it be presented as the whole truth, must be detrimental to at least some dimensions of human growth. And, in fact, any proper study of the Judaeo-Christian traditions in their historical realization will reveal orientations which have led to imbalance.

To give a few examples,⁴ the biblical commitment to a transcendent personal monotheistic concept of deity with severe prohibitions against any worship of divinity resident in nature had the effect of shrinking the previously pervasive presence of the divine throughout the natural world and constellating it in a strictly transcendent mode. The very purpose of Genesis was to withdraw Israel from the Near Eastern tradition.

2 *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 48; *Puebla Final Document*, nos.444–468, but note the Christological context within which these are to be read, nos.31-39.

3 L. Maldonado, “Popular Religion: Dimensions, Levels, and Types.” *Concilium*, 186 (1986) p. 8.

4 I am indebted for these to Tom Berry’s recent overview article “Wonderworld as Wasteworld: The Earth in Deficit,” *Cross Currents* Winter 1985–86, pp. 408–22.

Secondly, the redemption experience became the dominant mode of Christian consciousness, further diminishing attention to the creation experience. While a general sensitivity to the natural world and to cosmology survived down to the medieval period, during the 14th century, after the Black Death, an overwhelming commitment to redemption controlled the Christian experience. From then, down to our own times, creation has been a non-topic for theological reflection. Nature gradually disappeared from Christian consciousness.

Then there is the Christian emphasis on the spiritual nature of the human over against the (alleged) physical nature of other creatures.⁵ While I do not think that all of these orientations of Christianity, even when taken collectively, are responsible for the devastation of our world over the last few hundred years, they certainly contributed to that devastation.

My point in bringing up all these shortcomings of the tradition is to insist that it is only the balanced richness of a receiving culture whose relationship to the earth was not so alienated that could have corrected the imbalance. In other words, people's own religiosity was the necessary corrective to the destructive orientations of the tradition. No amount of refined theological study within the alienated tradition could have effected the cure, nor can it do so today.

In ordinary usage "people" are the commonality as-distinct from, if not opposed to, ruling cliques or endowed elites. My argument so far has been that such a distinction cannot ground an automatic value-judgment in the field of religiosity, such that the religion of the elites could ever be presumed to be more authentic.

"Popular religiosity" is a term invented by persons who clearly think that there is another kind of religiosity to be found somewhere in the world. Presumably, they have their own religiosity in mind. It is worth raising a question about this. It is, I think, arguable that people are confusing levels of articulation or reflection on faith with the fundamental reality of faith itself. I believe simply that there is no other kind of religiosity than people's religiosity – religiosity of people – and I find the suggestion that the religion of a particular class of people could ever be judged superior to that of another class an absurd suggestion. There are, of course, institutionalized practices of religion. And there is such a thing as the religiosity of people whose categories of understanding and expression of faith is very heavily shaped by institutional reality. Priests, religious, and theologians, and the few who read theological books and hear a lot of sermons probably fall into this category. But if there is only people's religiosity, how does one determine how one person's religiosity, how does one determine how one person's religiosity is better than another person's? There may well be ways of doing this but what I am suggesting at this point is that invocation by one group of the category "popular religiosity" in reference to another group is definitely not one of the acceptable ways. Insofar as authorities in the Church are tainted with the ideology of professionalism, they may be tempted to see themselves as

5 Tom Berry says, by contrast, that "If there is no spirituality in the atom, there is no spirituality in us".

being more truly religious than others, seen in a descending scale at the bottom of which would be those unfortunates who have absolutely no contact with them or with their institutions. This, like all temptations, is to be mightily resisted. The pertinent question which nobody is asking is what are the limits to which any People can share in a clerically conceived Christianity. The obvious differences between the priest's and the People's religion should not be contrasted too quickly in terms of the superior and the simple.⁶

Critique of Religion

But if the criticism of popular religion is wrongly conceived, the criticism of religion remains both possible and necessary. In other words, it is not its popular nature which is problematic when religion needs to be criticized: it is its alienated and alienating forms, forms which are to be found irrespective of the level of articulation or mode of cultural expression in which they may be embodied. The critique cannot simply be a matter of disqualifying certain rituals, symbols, rites, altered states of consciousness, as "unorthodox." Not many of these, no matter how strange they may seem to an over-cerebral Church, are of themselves indicative of false God-consciousness. What makes a medal a fetish? It cannot be the ring or scapular or medal as such. People must express themselves through tangible symbols: this belongs to authentic humanity. Those who laugh at prayer-wheels have no right to feel good about candles.⁷ And yet there is such a thing as false God-consciousness and the need for a critique is clear.

Dr. Nemenzo 8 tells of a high-ranking Party member who ate the child of his sister. He, as any right-thinking person would be, is rightly horrified by this manifestation of religiosity. In a similar manner, the thinkers of the Enlightenment were horrified by the cruelty of religious wars, manifest harm done to people in the name of religious faith, and, in general, the historical dark side of religious faith, and, in general, the historical dark side of religion. More recently people have been horrified to read of cannibalistic ritual murders carried out by fanatical groups in service of the government's anti-insurgency campaign. But the challenge is to understand such phenomena, not to simplistically try to ex-

6 Cf. M. Singleton, "Let the People Be," *Pro Mundi Vita Bulletin*, No. 61 (July 1976). "[Religion of the People is marked by] indifference to the purely speculative ... though the dispositions and interests of the spirits are well known or often anxiously the subject of enquiry, the conditions of their existence as such, let alone their nature, are often ignored by the People. There is ignorance and ignorance. One can be totally ignorant of what is in fact the case, one can ignore what is the case because it is not practically relevant to the matter in hand, but one can also ignore what others suppose to be the case because one's own presuppositions are quite other! We should not automatically assume that the People's ignorance is of the former rather than the latter type ... Idioms that are quite consistent when judged in keeping with their own intentionality can appear 'wrong' when illicitly appraised in the light of alien yardsticks of coherence"(p. 21)

7 Cf. M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, (London, 1969); *Natural Symbols*, (London, 1973); Reynaldo C. Ileto, "The Role of Culture in Transformation: Contrary Reflections," *Kalinangan*, 4:4, pp. 5-7.

8 *Centennial Lectures: Marxism in the Philippines* (Quezon City, 1985).

plain away all religiosity as some kind of mistake. Writing on the phenomenon of the fanatical groups, I have suggested that they manifest an extremely fettered form of idolatrous religiosity which can only be properly understood if causally situated within the “respectable idolatry” of the wider society. I argued that this respectable idolatry consisted in the wider society’s subordination of the value of human beings—who are the true image of God—to economic value. This is the source of the violence being done to people. I suggested that the extremes of self-alienation and violence which typify the groups are simply an exaggerated form of what is operative in the wider society. The exaggeration factor is due to the group’s rootlessness and near-total incomprehension of the social forces which are causing their alienation. Their incomprehension makes them easy victims to murderous manipulation by the oppressive forces of the wider society?

The Dialectical Nature of Religious Development

The word “religion” has such positive associations for most people that they easily forget the insistence of all religious traditions on the dangers of getting it wrong. It is easy, but fatal, to overlook the extent to which religious traditions convey their message in and through the medium of a critique of idolatry. The religious traditions of the earth are at one in claiming that the first necessary step for a person who would wish to respond to the mystery in life is to embark on a purgative way. The cleansing or purification to be effected in people is a liberation from the many distorting God-images which must be exposed and stripped away. This common wisdom of the religious traditions is grounded in a simple truth: actual religion is what is lived by people and people live it and understand it in terms of where they are at as human beings. The personal and social mediations of God-consciousness have often been terrible. The name of God has been instrumental in instigating the most barbarous human conduct. Simply recall the list of pogroms, crusades, holy wars, human sacrifices, witch hunts, and bigotries which stain the pages of history with the blood of so many victims. It is not surprising that many have concluded that god-consciousness is simply false consciousness. Freudians refer to collective neurosis, and Marxists to a ruse of the ruling class to sanction their dominative power and soothe the victims with false promises of justice in another world. Those who would still uphold religious value must be able to give an intelligible account of all this history of darkness.

The short formulation of the answer is to say that religious development is dialectical. All human authenticity has the form of a withdrawal from inauthenticity. All genuine religion is discovered and realized in redemption from the many traps of religious aberration. The Gospel’s insistence that we watch and pray implies the precariousness of any particular achievement of religious authenticity, the ease with which it can devolve into its opposite, and the impossibility of its ever becoming a secure possession.

If we understand this, it should occasion no surprise to discover that every

9 *Our Struggle is Against the Idols*, (Ozamiz City, 1984), p. vi.

positive value and insight to be found in the history of religions is matched by the occurrence of its opposite in the same history. Precisely because religion has to do with ultimate values and motivations, to be mistaken here has the most dire consequences:

When the love of God is not strictly associated with self-transcendence, then easily indeed it is reinforced by the erotic, the sexual, the orgiastic.. On the other hand, the love of God is penetrated with awe. God's thoughts and God's ways are very different from man's and by that difference God is terrifying. Unless religion is totally directed to what is good, to genuine love of one's neighbour and to a self-denial that is subordinated to a fuller goodness in oneself, then the cult of a God that is terrifying can slip over into the demonic, into an exultant destructiveness of oneself and others.¹⁰

The heart of the problem, then, lies in the authenticity or lack of authenticity in human development. But this issue of human authenticity can never be adequately raised in individualistic categories. Growth is always both personally and socially transformative and people's struggles toward authenticity are only rightly judged when their social context is taken into account and evaluated as promoting growth or disintegration.

What has almost been submerged in the modern privatization of faith is the truth that sin is primarily social and only derivatively individual insofar as socially sinful situations are internalized. Fortunately, we are witnessing a recovery of the older tradition by the Churches, manifest in the increasing condemnation of the social evils of racism, sexism, militarism, economic exploitation, environmental pollution, civil, and religious persecution.

According as the social fabric deteriorates, it becomes increasingly difficult for people to achieve personal integration and authenticity. The less understanding and control people have of their social environment, the more alienating the patterns of their religiosity will tend to be. The crisis of the world-system is felt acutely in countries like the Philippines. But even here, there is an enormous difference of felt effect on various strata of the population. Those who are completely marginal to the workings of the system, those who are most victimized by it, are those who can be expected to manifest the most destructive kinds of religiosity.⁵⁵ I suggest that the religious needs of less marginalized strata are being met by the pentecostalization of the Catholic Church and the proliferation of fundamentalist sects.

Idolatry, for the biblical tradition, is never a theoretical problem. It is the way

10. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (London, 1972), p. 111.

11 The cynical and murderous exploitation by the Armed Forces of this religious alienation was the subject of a broad-based consultation on June 17-19, 1985 in Ozamiz. This fed into the Summer meeting of the National Conference of Bishops and the bishops came through with an explicit condemnation of the "unholy strategy," seen to be "conducive to the worst forms of terrorism" and to have made of the CHDF "instruments of terror rather than of peace." For a correlation of the Philippine experience with that of other Third World Churches, particularly in Central and South America, see Gilbert Markus O. P. "Theologies of Repression," *New Blackfriars*, Jan. 1986, pp.37-45

we live God which is the only issue. The modern world came into existence through the conscious rejection of the tutelage of a Church claiming dominative power in the name of God. This Church, therefore, had been presenting false conceptions of God to the world—God as dominative power or, (there was a theological opposition!), God as manipulative emperor of the universe controlling everything. The sad part is that the non-dialectical atheists of modernity failed to investigate the possibility that what they were rightly rejecting was no more than a hang-over from past distortions of Christianity as Christendom and that the source of these distortions lay in the human hankering after dominative power.¹² They thought they could harness this hankering through technocratic progress and/or class warfare, to bring about more just and humane social orders. The result was the sad transition from sacralist authoritarianisms to secularist bureaucratic authoritarianisms.

Knowledge Born of Fear

By failing to advert to the need for genuine God-consciousness, modern cultures were left vulnerable to the deep fears and aggressions which have hounded human history with untold horror. Modern science and technology were increasingly made to serve a death-prone bias and turned into instruments of mass destruction. Conceived in a knowledge born of fear vis-à-vis the natural world, contemporary science and technology now find themselves alienated by those reservoirs of historical fear and aggression we call military-industrial complexes. Cultures in both capitalist and party-bureaucratic systems are gutted of their richness as people are forced to adapt themselves to the competing mass-culture industries.¹³

Christianity, banished from the power centre of society, is largely reduced to competing sacralist hierarchies – Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant – ironically mirroring in fascinating manner the patterns of power relationships manifest in secular bureaucracies. Clerical “professionals” tend to regulate local sacramental services in accordance with directives passed down from higher ecclesiastical authorities. This tends to produce consumer passivity in the laity.

Right down to the eve of the second Vatican Council theologians persisted in picturing God either as construction engineer moving about his building blocks or as an emperor overseeing all the activities of his subordinates. They thought they were working to reconcile divine and human freedoms. In fact, their conceptions of divine power and knowledge merely mirrored the increasingly alienating notions of social power as domination and of knowledge as manipulative logical or technical control – two notions which have led to the unclear dead-end of our time.

What we are witnessing here is a God-consciousness which unwittingly rein-

¹² The most brilliant formulation of this remains the chapter on the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

¹³ Cf. for entertaining reflection, Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1-Harmondsworth, 1981).

forces the movement towards death in history. An awareness of how easily all religion, including “official” religion can become idolatrous, might have helped people to react against the culturally imposed pictures in favour of a more authentic picture. More critical attention to the Gospel might have told us that the only acceptable picture to flow out of authentic Christian understanding of Creative Mystery is that of free, conscious, and personal acts generating free, conscious, and personal acts: an analogy of meaningful and worthwhile dialogue, not of domination and control. This leads us to consider our final topic. What is the criterion of authenticity in religion? It is the theme of authentic God-consciousness and of the knowledge born of love.

Faith is the knowledge born of love and in its light people are enabled to recognize the liberating truth of the story of the Exodus and the story of Jesus.¹⁴ In its light our minds can be healed of the distortions of the knowledge born of fear, since it enables us to identify the source of these distortions.

The knowledge born of love enables us to recognize the truth of God in the Mystery which entered into a covenant of life with an enslaved and oppressed Jewish people. As a people who gained their identity in the Exodus event, they were committed to identifying the love of God with love for their brothers and sisters. The long sad history of the Covenant is a narrative of how the truth of the Mystery is both revealed and hidden in the struggles of the people to repent of their sins, to remain faithful to themselves and to God, above all, to resist the temptation coming from the surrounding cultures to identify the Divine with dominative power, the power of empire. This struggle is most evident in the confrontation between the prophets and the establishment. The downward spiral of history led to heightened messianic expectation. Even the form that the Messiah/Messianic people would have to take was grasped in Second Isaiah but nobody felt up to such an unprepossessing role as that of Suffering Servant. The dream of a solution to our woes through an exercise of dominative power proved too addictive. To heal the world by taking on our own shoulders the evil of the world and turning it around lacked appeal, somehow.

With the coming of Jesus the identification of God with the enslaved and the poor is intensified. The Divine Mystery is revealed in Jesus as the One who has taken sides, not with the rich and imperial elites, but with the poor and oppressed peoples of the whole world. In Jesus’ living and preaching of the Kingdom of God, the demonic tendency to identify God with dominative power is decisively broken. To respond to the Kingdom present and operative as free gift in Jesus and those who follow him among the lowly, is to let God be God in and through us. This God does not will human suffering. If we will only let Him live us the Beatitudes become simple truth.

Happy are the poor, for the reign of God is theirs.

Happy those who mourn, for there is One about to comfort them!

Happy are the hungry, for there is One about to give them their fill!

The love of God is a gift, like all of life, but it is a gift constitutive of and

¹⁴ Cf. B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, pp. 115–19.

transformative of our human selves, not intrusive into our lives and circumstances. That is why the religious and political elites, compromised by their involvement with dominative power, sought to destroy Jesus. The freedom which he embodied evokes life and freedom in people: either we respond in freedom or we destroy the disturbing source of the challenge.

The scandal of the Cross is the scandal of divine Intelligence-Love identified with all the victims of history in the passion of Christ. But that identification of the Divine Mystery with suffering humanity was not a passive acceptance of suffering but an empowering transformation whereby the force of evil and death were overcome in what we call resurrection. This is our symbol to express how the God of life in whom there is no darkness and who created this world for our sake can and will bring life out of death if only there will be people who will love life more than their own death and be prepared to give themselves as Jesus did, heart and soul, for this world and the people on it. The events on Calvary reveal the divine Heart at the center of all human history. Human freedom and human personhood are redeemed but not by a so-called divine omnipotence that could overpower us by imposing a humane order on history. Contrary to our cherished images, the Reign of God, like the Exodus before it, was not the act of a divine engineer or imperial bureaucrat controlling all history and manipulating to achieve its ends despite free human response! "Empowering transformation" does not "produce" a redeemed humankind as a factory produces consumer objects. Such a redemption would be a contradiction in terms because the victims of history are victims because of just such efforts to dominate and control. Rather, Christian redemption liberates human freedom by issuing an invitation, a call, to live out a discipleship of faith, hope and love and by empowering us to respond by metanoia, personally and socially transformative conversion.

As has been clear from the very beginning, there can be no theoretical criterion of authentic religiosity. How, then, can we even begin to discern genuine from false God-consciousness in the history of Christianity, marked as it is by more than its share of depersonalizing and dehumanizing sin? The touchstone, the decisive criterion, lies in how a genuine God-consciousness always leads those whose lives it informs to seek out solidarity with the poor, with the victims of history, in their struggles for justice and freedom. Quite predictably, the criterion is one of practice: "by their fruits you shall know them."

The forms of prayer or devotions preferred by people is no sure indicator of anything other than their preference. Whether or not they are praying to the living God will be infallibly manifest in the stand they take in relation to the struggles of the poor for life and truth and justice. Alienated religiosity is at home in the crucifying world. Those who know the living God must gravitate to where God stands in this world—in solidarity with suffering women and men.