

FOLK RELIGIONS

The mixing of two religions – one for Sunday and another for the rest of the week

by Johan D. Tangelder

Folk Religions: they are the mixture of local expressions of Christianity or Islam with local animistic practices. They constitute a two-tiered religious practice, mixing people's formal religions (Christianity and Islam) with the worship of magic, spirits, ancestors, divination, and other religious practices. In the case of Christianity, Christians often turn to their old ways for answers, even as they go to church for forgiveness and fellowship with God.

Since the September 11, 2001 plane attacks on the United States questions about religion and culture are front and centre in popular as well as academic discussions. A few pertinent questions are: Isn't religion a matter of private belief to be relegated to the home and to the church, synagogue or mosque? Don't all religions lead to the same God? Aren't all religions equally good for individuals and society? Don't Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad all guide us in the path of peace? Do worldviews really matter?

The authors of *Understanding Folk Religion* convincingly demonstrate that worldviews do matter! For example, an African villager complained after going to a missionary doctor, "How can he help? All what he did was to ask me questions." He believed a proper doctor would have "divined" the source and prescribed an appropriate remedy – a suitable ritual plus some medicine – and not wasted time asking seemingly irrelevant questions. For this African, religion is power – a power against threats of death, and power over life. Religion that is not experienced as power is not satisfying for him.

Syncretism

This African's worldview (religion) is animistic – he believes all natural things, trees, rocks, lakes, etc, have a soul – and his belief should be taken seriously. Not too long ago, Christians believed that the religions of tribal people were nothing but superstitions, which would eventually be replaced by Christianity. But this has not been the case. Traditional religions often persist as undercurrents after people claim to have become Christians. The result is a split-level Christianity. Christians attend church on Sunday, but during the week turn to the shaman, magician, and diviner for help in the problems of everyday life. The danger in responding to popularly held beliefs, or folk religions as the authors describe them, is syncretism - combining elements of Christianity with folk beliefs and practices in such a way that the Gospel loses its integrity and message.

I saw this phenomenon in the Philippines. Roman Catholicism was merely a veneer that covered deeply held ancient Malayan beliefs. These popular beliefs

must be taken into account if effective communication of the Gospel is to take place. Missionaries should have a good understanding of the language and the culture of the people they want to reach. The authors point out that too often missionaries focus their attention on the message they bring, and ignore the context in which they communicate it. Consequently, the Gospel remains incomprehensible, fragmented, foreign, and irrelevant. Missionaries should attempt to understand the religious beliefs and practices of the people and provide Biblical answers to the questions they face.

A mixed collection of rites and beliefs

Folk religions are made up of an amazing assortment of disconnected beliefs: spirits, ancestors, witchcraft, divinization, and the demonic. Their practices are also greatly diverse: birth rites, funerals, temple ceremonies, religious processions, village sacrifices, rain dances, public exorcisms, and pilgrimages. And in all major religions extraordinary experiences are reported: speaking in tongues, prophecies and resurrections. Another religious phenomenon is the spectacular rise of new religious movements. An example is the Cargo Cults of Melanesia, which claim that someday cultural heroes or ancestors will return to earth and bring people prosperity. When oil companies drilled wells there, the people remembered that their ancestors would return through a hole in the ground. In the past century many new religions emerged in Latin America, most of them spiritist in nature. In Japan more than 23,000 new religions emerged, attracting more than 57 million followers.

Why the attraction of folk religions? The authors maintain that they are human efforts to control life. This is reflected in the first sin, when Satan tempted Adam and Eve, not to worship him, but to worship themselves. Hence, self-centeredness and self-possession remain the greatest temptation and the central concern for most folk religious beliefs and practices. People make sacrifices to gods and the spirits to bargain for healing and prosperity. They turn ancestors into gods and spirit to control their own well-being. Obviously, missionaries cannot simply ignore or condemn these beliefs without an adequate explanation, because if they do so, the people will return to their own ways covertly. Christians must take them seriously – not because they are true, but because these are the beliefs that the people have about reality, and they will not simply die out when confronted with other beliefs. For example, in South Africa, an estimated four-fifths of the population regularly consults traditional healers. In other words, if we want to be effective witnesses for our Lord, it is imperative that we recover an awareness of the spiritual world. The spirit world is very real for millions of people. Furthermore, consistent teaching of new converts is a vital ministry. The authors note that today many Protestants have smorgasbord theologies, and lack a simple coherent understanding of the Gospel. They rightly state that the Gospel must be presented in concrete terms. One crucial method of instruction is the teaching of the catechism and the confessions. They do not only "provide a

comprehensive view of the Christian faith, but they all preserve that faith over time."

Understanding Folk Religion is a fascinating book with a wealth of information on cultures and folk religious practices. It creates a real awareness of areas of life that need to be confronted by the Gospel. The authors also show how Western Christians have been more impacted by their own secular culture than by the transforming power of the Gospel. As a former missionary, I wish this book had been available before we left for the Philippines in 1977. It would have been very helpful in preparing for the mission field. But this book is not only for missionaries, but also for all Christians engaged in cross-cultural ministries in their own societies. It provides sensitive, sensible, and theologically sound guidelines. And if the publishers are thinking about another reprint, I suggest they include an index of Scripture references. It would further enhance its value.