

POPULAR CULTURE, POPULAR RELIGION: FRAMING THE QUESTION

By ALLAN FIGUEROA DECK

WESTERN CULTURE AND OFFICIAL CHRISTIANITY have tended to view popular culture and religion with a great deal of ambivalence. This ambivalence is not something new. The first Christians were not followers of a 'popular' messiah or way of life. The gospel they proclaimed was a radical critique of many prevailing values and attitudes. Christians were viewed as subversives, as 'atheists'. Perhaps the clearest instance of this is found in Jesus's use of the parables. The parables reveal a deep familiarity with both popular and official culture and religion of first-century Palestine. Jesus enters into it at once to affirm and to challenge. His message and, more importantly, his actions are counter-cultural in several important respects. Among them would be his teaching about loving everyone including one's enemies and his implicit, if not explicit, way of relating to the poor and powerless and to women.¹

Yet the first Christians immediately confronted the issue of popular religion and culture. How they eventually dealt with this issue quite literally guaranteed Christianity's survival. Today we discuss the process by which the first Christians and the Church related to the cultures and religions around them as inculturation.² This process requires an openness as well as a critical sense. Catholicism in both its eastern and western forms entered into a prolonged and complicated dialogue with other religions and cultures. The first instance of it was the debate about the conditions for admitting gentile converts into the community. The apologetical writings of the second century, the brilliant and extensive patristic theology and the lively conciliar debates may all be understood as efforts to inculturate Christianity at the early stages of its infancy. There was a whole gamut of popular religions and 'isms' to contend with: Gnosticism, Mithraic religions, mystery cults, the cult of the

emperors, to name just a few. There were more sophisticated challenges to Christianity as well from what we might call 'high culture': the challenge of Greek philosophy and the Roman sense of law and society, the *civitas*.

The Constantinian settlement of the fourth century was a watershed in regard to the question of how Christianity would relate to popular culture and religion. At this point western Christianity initiated a pattern of inculturation that led to the incorporation of vast numbers of people into the Church. For a thousand years the Church incorporated a vast array of peoples into her bosom, as it were, often by converting whole peoples and tribes. The stress was put on baptizing the symbolic leader of the people, the king or queen. The people would invariably follow.

Reformers in the fifteenth and especially in the sixteenth centuries eventually reacted to the abuses that such an open attitude toward popular culture and religion sometimes engendered. Medieval Catholicism was characterized by a remarkable tolerance toward the religious attitudes and approaches of the popular masses. The clergy, often uneducated, went along with these popular trends. There was a pronounced orientation toward sacraments and sacramentals, toward local rituals and customs. Symbol, powerful but quite open-ended, was perhaps the main vehicle by which Christian beliefs and attitudes were being communicated. Christianity provided a treasure chest of symbols that the popular masses took to themselves and localized. The veneration of local saints and their mortal remains (relics) as well as miraculous madonnas identified with local places of pilgrimage provided a powerful symbolic milieu for this popular form of Christianity. It was especially suited to the vast majority of believers who were quite illiterate and whose approaches to learning were limited to the spontaneity and affectivity of oral communication.

The last great flowering of the Constantinian approach to inculturation occurred in sixteenth-century Mexico. Robert Ricard in *The spiritual conquest of Mexico* contrasts the Catholic approach toward conversion to a new approach later adopted by Protestantism:

. . . missiologists are more and more discussing the idea that the goal of mission activity among the infidels is not the conversion of individuals, but the establishment of the visible Church with all its organisms and institutions which imply the extension of this expression of a visible Church.³

The veritable conversion of a culture as opposed to the conversion of individuals involves not so much the integration of explicit ideas, beliefs or doctrines. Rather, it has to do with the integration of symbols—something infinitely more subtle and challenging than simply ‘getting one’s ideas across’. The insight of the Constantinian approach was that Christianity becomes real to people and moves them when it is experienced and communicated in symbolic fashion. That is how it passes from being merely meaningful (in some cognitive way) to being *affectively* meaningful.

The Reformation represented a reaction to all of this due in large part to the rise of literacy and a growing burger class. Literacy made it possible for the first time in the history of Christianity for large numbers of ordinary believers to have direct access to the sources of their faith tradition, especially to the scriptures. This meant that the highly symbolic and analogical drive of Christianity that allowed it to attract and maintain large numbers of ordinary people, the popular masses, was significantly mitigated. The culture of literate people tends to be articular and univocal. It also makes it possible for humans to experience their individuality as never before. No longer are they dependent upon the mediators—the preachers, official teachers, the community, the Church itself. Their literacy allows them to go directly to the sources and, as the reformers of the sixteenth century insisted, to God.⁴

The Reformation represented a move away from the culture and religion of the popular masses in the name of recuperating the spirit of early Christianity, purifying it of syncretisms that had contaminated it over a thousand years of inculturation with so many distinct tribes and peoples pressing in from the North as well as the South. Protestantism arose and flourished especially in Northern Europe, precisely in those places where the bourgeoisie was coming into its own. The gulf between the popular masses and this incipient middle class was quite notable. Protestantism became identified with the more affluent middle class, with the first nations in the world to achieve universal literacy. One of their main criticisms of Roman Catholicism was the way in which the popular masses with their abusive and marginally orthodox customs and traditions maintained a grip on the Church. The Church, for its part, took the criticism to heart and launched a Counter-Reformation which stressed the codification, centralization and standardization of custom and belief in the name of orthodoxy and discipline. The Catholic Church, through the agency of the Jesuits and other religious orders that arose

at this time, began to form in earnest its own bourgeoisie even though it never enjoyed the same numbers of people in this class as did the Protestants to the north. Tridentine Catholicism took to heart the critique of the Church's permissiveness of dubious popular faith expressions and launched a campaign to purify itself. Popular culture and religion came to be viewed with considerable suspicion now not only by Protestants but by committed Roman Catholics as well.

This trend in western Christianity was exacerbated by the Enlightenment. For now suspicion of the culture and religion of the popular masses was related directly to the issue of progress for humanity. Modernity meant freeing human beings and entire nations and peoples from the bonds of ignorance and superstition. This was to happen by the systematic application of the findings of science to the life of human beings and the development of technologies that would eliminate human misery, disease and perhaps even death. Science would also shed light on the socio-economic and political conditions that would eventually bring about the best possibilities for humans. Capitalists claimed that they had discovered the key to this in the laws of the marketplace, while Marxists said they had found it in historical materialism and other inexorable laws based upon 'science'. In both cases the culture and religion of the popular masses was exactly what needed to be eliminated, a major part of the 'problem', not of the 'solution'.⁵

The Enlightenment mindset was to permeate the world of Protestant scholarship of the nineteenth century. The first religious modernists were Protestants but Catholics finally got on the bandwagon in the latter decades of that century. This mentality was especially prevalent among theologians both Protestant and Catholic, a central point in Harvey Cox's *Religion in the secular city*:

People's religion is not élite or clerical religion or the religion of cultivated intellectuals . . . Modern theology is not ready to take it up. Part of the reason is that modern theology arose as a repudiation of folk piety and popular religion. The central task of modern theology as its practitioners envisaged it was the purification of religious belief and practice from the dross elements that seemed to make it an anachronism and an anomaly in the modern world. For much of modern theology, people's religion was the enemy, the obstacle that prevented thoughtful people from accepting the faith . . . The history of antagonism makes it hard for the modern theological enterprise to recognize and draw on people's religion as a key resource in the building of a postmodern theology.⁶

Langdon Gilkey in an earlier study of the effect of the Second Vatican Council on the future of Catholicism bemoans the deadening influence of Enlightenment rationalism on liberal Protestantism and he fears that Catholicism in the name of 'dialogue with the modern world' will succumb to the same stagnation that he sees in the mainline, historical Churches:

Related essentially to the bourgeois middle-class worlds of Europe, Britain, and America, and in the last two to the 'Wasp' worlds of small towns and suburbs, Protestantism seems . . . to have been so engulfed in that world as merely to reproduce its individualistic, quantitative, moralistic, non emotional, and in many respects naturalistic, bourgeois world in ecclesiastical form . . .⁷

Notwithstanding this trend toward 'élitism', toward a disdain for popular culture, there were always countervailing movements. In Lutheranism there arose a reaction to the somewhat dry and sombre norm of prayer and worship adopted in the decades after Luther's death. Pietism was a recognition of the need for faith to express itself in the symbols, myths and rituals of ordinary folk. At the same time there arose among Lutherans and other Protestants a missionary drive. This meant that the close identification of Protestantism with certain places in Germany, Holland or England, for example, was to be moderated by an awareness of the need for mission activity. One cannot be in a missionary mode without questioning one's attitudes toward popular culture and religion since that is often if not usually what the missioner has to confront.

German and French romanticism of the nineteenth century exhibited a strong interest in popular culture, in the spontaneous and irregular in art and literature. Nationalism was on the rise and with it a desire to discover the spirit of the *volk*, the people. Popular poetry was now catalogued as were the simple myths of the peasants and poor. The study of folklore thus emerged. Ethnographic studies revealed the customs and rites of so-called 'primitive people'. This contributed to a widening of the understanding of culture to include the customs of the most diverse peoples of the earth, not just the known world of the Mediterranean basin.

The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of a huge missionary outreach by both Protestants and Catholics. The Churches came into sustained contact with people on every continent and, in conjunction with various neo-colonialist schemes, began to penetrate cultures all over the world. This contact has served to relativize the ethno-

centricity so characteristic of European Christianity. It led gradually to a change in the way culture is understood.

For centuries culture and civilization were conceived of in terms of the Western experience. The concepts often implied 'high culture', the cultivation of the mind, of learning, of science and of the aesthetic sense. Culture was the pursuit of individual free agents who could advance by cultivating these rational qualities and aesthetic sensibilities. In the twentieth century cultural anthropology has documented the rich diversity of human ways of feeling, thinking and being. The Western ideal of the human, with its stress on each person's vocation and individuality, has come up against many other approaches toward being human. The disillusionment with modernity (another name of this paradigmatic Western culture) began in earnest with the Second World War. Was it not Germany, a most enlightened nation, that gave rise to the monster Hitler? The crisis of modernity became more acute after the war. Science developed the means of mass destruction on a scale never before imagined—atomic weapons. It was also leading to the destruction of the ecology. Moreover, modern progress could not guarantee true human happiness. Addictions and pseudo-religions of all sorts now emerged as people searched for a more meaningful life.⁸

In the period after the Second World War another development that has furthered the interest in popular culture and religion is the demise of colonialism and the rise of the Third World. Human beings are more aware of the fact that the majority of humans on this earth are not Westerners and most certainly not middle-class. Once again the ethnocentricity of Western norms is challenged. Now attention is focused on the many peoples of the earth and their distinctive religions. These religions are not only the ones that have a great literary background, many normative documents, and elaborate theological reflection, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Taoism, Confucianism and Islam, but the practical household religions of China, popular Catholicism of Latin America, the popular Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban religions, the so-called independent Churches of Africa as well as the many local forms of Islam throughout the world. One may also include here Evangelical and Pentecostal/charismatic approaches to Christianity. For these branches of Protestantism are forms of popular religion in that they stress 1) belief in miracles, 2) an orientation toward healing, and 3) a clear-cut stress on the supernatural.⁹

One of the more notable results of this turn toward culture and critique of modernity is a renewed interest in popular religion and

culture. The so-called New Age religion, interest in holistic medicine, the occult, UFOs, parapsychology and any other number of postmodern religious trends reflect the turn toward the popular characteristic of the times. Another expression of it is the 'option for the poor' which the Latin American Church took the lead in proclaiming shortly after the Second Vatican Council. This option has been assimilated as well by First World Churches. The influence of liberation theologies in Latin America and beyond is yet another instance of this turn toward the popular. The 1974 Synod on the evangelization of peoples broached the issue of inculturation without yet formally using the term. But Pope Paul VI expressed this new concern for popular culture and religion with these words:

. . . evangelization will lose much of its power and efficacy if it does not take into consideration the people to whom it is addressed, if it does not make use of their language, their signs and their symbols, if it does not offer an answer to the questions which are relevant to them, if, in a word, it does not reach and influence their way of life.¹⁰

Pope John Paul II has made inculturation one of the fundamental themes of his extensive writings and talks, and in 1984 he established the Pontifical Council on Culture.

Among theologians inculturation has become an issue with ramifications in almost every area. Biblical studies led the way with their insight into the complex cultural linguistic and historical processes that gave rise to the various parts of scripture. Now one hears about the inculturation of christology, of Trinitarian theology, or of the liturgy. More important, contemporary theologians are becoming more and more aware of the implications of social class and cultural location for the doing of theology. They are acknowledging the limitations on perspective that derive from one's social class and cultural background. They are acknowledging what it means truly to have what Karl Rahner called a 'world church'. Western approaches predominated for two millennia. They cannot predominate in the years to come if, indeed, there is to be a truly world Church where non-westerners are by far in the majority. This matter has direct bearing on the issue of popular culture and religion. For those are the realities that the Church in its outreach must confront.

Yet pastors, theologians and Christian faithful alike must ponder the underlying issue: how can we remain faithful to the gospel we have received, to its uniqueness and transcultural significance? How far should we relativize our particular understanding of the

Christian tradition, acknowledging the serious limitations and blind spots that flow from our social and cultural location? How far can and should the Church go in adapting to popular culture? How can the Spirit be identified in the religious promptings and values of so many disparate peoples throughout the globe? In what sense do the socio-economically poor, the great masses of human being on this earth, evangelize the comfortable and more learned Christians of the First World? Is Christianity an affair for popular or mass culture at all? Does it not require a serious movement away from the banality, superficiality and opportunism of what passes for popular culture and religion?

The thought of Juan Luis Segundo

More than any other contemporary theologian Juan Luis Segundo has attempted to wrestle with the relationship between popular culture and religion on the one hand and the gospel on the other. He refuses to get on the populist bandwagon or even uncritically to accept the notion of 'option for the poor'. To him it is utterly clear that the demands of the gospel are exigencies of and for a minority. The 'leaven' and 'salt' referred to in the Synoptics are metaphors for the nature of the relationship between the élite and the masses in Christianity. They are not in opposition, but rather exist to

create, for oneself and others, new forms of energy, that will permit lines of conduct that are necessarily mechanized to serve as the basis for new and more creative possibilities of a minority character in each and every human being.¹¹

In the last chapter of *The liberation of theology* he tries further to articulate the interaction between the gospel and popular culture and religion:

. . . we are confronted here with a hermeneutical circle that is rich in promise. If that promise fails to be realized, it will be due to the fact that we have wholly identified the exigencies of the gospel message with the popular wisdom and thus ceased to hold before us a *twofold* norm—which Cone rightly insists upon for any black theology of liberation. If the Christian message is wholly identified or equated with a specific cultural wisdom, then it will be reduced to the point where a serious, creative return to its own sources will be entirely ruled out. For these sources will cease to be normative, since they logically cannot be wholly identified with popular awareness as such.¹²

Implications for Christian spirituality

This historical sketch provides the background for discussing the implications of the turn toward popular culture and religion for Christian spirituality. There are three I wish to develop here: 1) spirituality is not confined to élites, 2) popular religion is rich in experiences that enliven the practice of Christianity, 3) the question of affectivity, its importance in the living of a committed Christian life, arises in the analysis of popular culture and religion.

One of the inconsistencies that I have noted in theological education is that between its openness to inter-religious dialogue with the 'Great Traditions', (an important requirement of the Second Vatican Council) and a lack of openness with respect to what anthropologist Robert Redford calls the 'Little Traditions', popular expressions of culture and faith.¹³ The fact that these 'Little Traditions' have little or no written sources or literary traditions behind them does not mean they have little if any significance. Spirituality is often nourished by literary texts and traditions that have been built up around a spiritual writer. Examples that come to mind are the great Spanish mystics, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. The social location of those who followed them, their interpreters, had a great effect on the spiritualities that developed.

Victor Codina pursues this thought in a suggestive article on popular religiosity in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius of Loyola. He is intrigued by the fact that the intense Franciscanism of Ignatius's own religiosity and its natural attractiveness for the uneducated and poor—its preference for the graphic and concrete, the sensual and experiential, its somatic orientation (interest in fasting and bodily penances)—tended to be lost early in the following generation of Jesuit interpreters of the *Exercises*:

One of the first impressions we get as we contemplate both the text and the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises* leads us to conclude that they are directed primarily to sectors of society and the church that are not working class or poor. Both in content and structure the *Exercises* correspond to a cultivated and almost élitist spirituality.¹⁴

Yet Codina is puzzled because Ignatius himself developed the core of the *Exercises* as an uneducated person. Today, indeed, we might have called Ignatius at this point of his life an 'unchurched', uneducated layman. Ignatius's religious background was popular. Nadal referred to Ignatius's spirituality as *naturaliter christianus*.¹⁵ We also think of the Eighteenth Annotation of the *Spiritual Exercises* which

insists that certain approaches in the giving of the *Exercises* be adapted to *la personas rudas y sin letras*, 'simple and uneducated persons'.¹⁶ Another remarkable aspect of the *Exercises* commending them to ordinary people is their focus on affectivity. These two features, however, the popular religiosity of a medieval, Franciscan type and the focus on the emotions, have tended to be de-emphasized or moderated in the centuries following Ignatius. Yet these are precisely the aspects of the *Exercises* that find in today's popular culture and religion, especially among Third-World people and the poor, an enthusiastic response.

A second lesson to be learned with regard to popular culture and religion's impact upon spirituality is the pressing need for a simple, straightforward approach to God and to ministry. Mainline Christianity of Europe and North America, Protestantism and Catholicism, have become more cerebral than ever. This reflects the upward mobility of the leaders, the clergy, the official teachers of these faiths. The single most successful outreach currently going on in Christianity today is Pentecostalism and the Evangelical Church Growth Movement. The orientation of these approaches is inspired by a profound knowledge of popular culture. Most notable, however, is their ability to incorporate people from the popular classes into ministry in a timely way that allows them to develop their charisms. The model of formation, whether priestly, religious or lay, in the mainstream churches tends to be cognitive, somewhat rationalist and fixated on schooling. It often kills the spontaneity and giftedness of ordinary people who want to serve God and neighbour here and now. This excessive concern for the schooling of ministers and the idea that spiritual formation is attained mainly in a school setting reflects a social class and cultural mindset. While I understand the need for well-trained ministers, I also understand the need to acknowledge the gift of the Spirit in ordinary believers, something that early Christianity seemed quite convinced about as even a casual reading of the Acts of the Apostles suggests.

The growing professionalism of both lay and clerical leaders in European and North American Christianity makes the Church and the Christian way of life seem ever more distant from the milieu of working-class people and the popular classes. The standard of living of the clergy in the United States, for example, has gradually moved up. The style of preaching has tended to reflect the more sedate style and refined tastes of the educated middle class. The 'fire and brimstone', the drama of the Lenten mission, has all but disappeared

as mainstream parishes and their clergy become more and more middle class. This sense of control rooted in the middle-class context is also matched by a style of prayer, worship and architecture that approximates that of New England prayer halls—drab, cold and bare—at least for a struggling working-class family who seek to find a passion in prayer and worship commensurate with their very real daily struggles. Is there a spirituality for working-class people, for the poor? Today's turn toward popular culture and religion makes this question all the more urgent.

The third implication of the turn to popular culture and religion has to do with the flight from feeling that comes with middle-class status. We have already expressed this idea. Here I want to give an example from the history of evangelization in the United States. This is a point that sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark make in their study of the decline of Anglicanism, Congregationalism and Presbyterianism in the nineteenth-century United States. Those Churches came under the influence of seminaries that produced ministers who had little if any interest in reaching out to the people in the prairies or urban ghettos. Nor did they have ministers who spoke the people's language, or understood their values and experience. Those Churches abandoned the field to the Baptists and the Methodists who went where the people could be found and preached in powerful, moving ways, in a language and style that stirred the emotions and even provided a catharsis—exactly what this often displaced, immigrant people needed.¹⁷

Finally, spirituality rooted in the struggle for social justice, a spirituality of liberation, exemplifies one direction that Christian spirituality is taking today. One of its features is precisely the passion, the reality, the graphic nature of its eschatological vision of the community in historical praxis. The growing numbers of evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, however, also speak to us of a spirituality that relates with great naturalness to the popular masses. Despite the excesses and/or defects, intelligent students of today's contemporary trends in religion and spirituality must take the charismatic/Pentecostal movements quite seriously. Both these examples and many others as well give us a clue to how the anthropological concept of culture and the turn toward the popular will affect Christian spiritualities of the future. The framework provided here may be useful for students of spirituality desiring to identify the serious limitations that social class and cultural location place on our understanding of how God works in others, especially

the popular masses and the poor who are often, in a certain sense, more representative of the human than people of my own class and culture. How does the Spirit work in them?

NOTES

¹ Norman Perrin stresses the role of the parables in the search for the core of Jesus's message in *Rediscovering the teaching of Jesus*, New York, Harper and Row, 1976.

² One of the more complete introductions to the complex topic of inculturation is Aylward Shorter's *Toward a theology of inculturation*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1988.

³ Robert Ricard, 'Prologo a la Primera Edicion en Espanol', in *La conquista espiritual de México* (Mexico, D.F., Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1986), p 21. Translation is that of the present author.

⁴ See Walter J. Ong, *The presence of the word*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1970. Ong contrasts orality with literacy and develops the cultural and theological implications of these profound differences.

⁵ This is one of the points made by Langdon Gilkey in his suggestive article, 'Modern myth-making and the possibilities of a twentieth-century theology', in L.K. Shook (ed), *Theology of renewal*, vol. 1 (New York, Herder and Herder, 1968), pp 283-312.

⁶ See Harvey Cox, 'Carnival faith—people's religion and postmodern theology', in *Religion in the secular city* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1984), p 241.

⁷ Langdon Gilkey, *Catholicism confronts modernity* (New York, Seabury Press, 1975), p 14.

⁸ One of the more articular critics of the modern mindset is Huston Smith. See his 'Beyond the modern Western mindset', in *Beyond the post-modern mind* (Wheaton, Ill., Theosophical Publishing, 1982), pp 132-161.

⁹ See Peter W. Williams, *Popular religion in America* (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp 24-26.

¹⁰ Pope Paul VI, *On evangelization in the modern world*, in Austin Flannery O.P. (ed), *Vatican Council II* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982, no. 63), p 742.

¹¹ Juan Luis Segundo, *The liberation of theology* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1976), p 231.

¹² Juan Luis Segundo, *The liberation of theology*, p 239.

¹³ See Robert Redford, *Peasant society and culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1956.

¹⁴ Victor Codina, 'La religiosidad popular en los ejercicios de San Ignacio', in *Revista Latinoamericana de teología*, No. 10 (April 1987), p 90.

¹⁵ See J.I. Tellechea, *Ignacio de Loyola, solo y a pie* (Madrid, 1986), p 90.

¹⁶ See *Ejercicios espirituales* in *Obras completas de San Ignacio* (Madrid, BAC, 1982), p 211.

¹⁷ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, 'How the upstart sects won America', *Journal for the scientific study of religion* (March 1989), p 46-55.