

# International Sociology

<http://iss.sagepub.com>

---

## Modern Popular Religion: A Complex Object of Study for Sociology

Cristián Parker G.

*International Sociology* 1998; 13; 195

DOI: 10.1177/026858098013002004

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://iss.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/13/2/195>

---

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



International Sociological Association

**Additional services and information for *International Sociology* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://iss.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://iss.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations** (this article cites 10 articles hosted on the SAGE Journals Online and HighWire Press platforms):  
<http://iss.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/13/2/195>

---

# Modern Popular Religion

## *A Complex Object of Study for Sociology*

Cristián Parker G.

*University of Santiago, Chile*

**abstract:** Popular religion is a widespread phenomenon among peasants of the Third World, but it is the vitality and force of popular religious expressions in the *urban* popular milieu of developing countries that pose serious questions for classical secularization theories. The religious sense produced by the lower strata of the urban populace in contexts of subjugation in urbanization and globalization is complex and depends on several factors. In order to analyse it, sociology must abandon its rationalist and erudite background to move forward to new paradigms that allow us to understand how it is that contemporary popular religion – including seemingly more primitive religious expressions – pertains to modernity and is able to be understood as part of the dialectic of current globalization. This article proposes a different way of understanding popular life and faith – another view of the people's religious creativity, syncretism and religious heterogeneity, an appreciation of a 'different logic' of the people and the countercultural character of the rationality that they acquire in various contexts.

**keywords:** Christianity ♦ Latin America ♦ popular culture ♦ popular religion ♦ sociology of religion

---

In Latin America, the multifaceted complexity of the topic 'popular piety' has already been studied with some thoroughness. Innumerable studies have been devoted to the theme recently, and the bibliography continues to grow daily.<sup>1</sup> A similar process is observed in other parts of the so-called Third World, especially Africa and Asia.<sup>2</sup> We have accumulated an enormous quantity of knowledge concerning the beliefs, rites, myths, moral attitudes, customs and traditional religious organizations of the peasantry

International Sociology ♦ June 1998 ♦ Vol 13(2): 195–212  
SAGE (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi)  
[0268-5809(199806)13:2;195–212;004784]

and aboriginal groups, precisely those groups less exposed to modernization and secularization processes. True, 'popular piety' or 'popular religiousness' has often been associated with the perdurance of traditional and progressive marginalized rituals and beliefs in the context of modern secularized societies. But the observer must be struck by what occurs sociologically in popular religious expressions precisely where, according to classical theories of secularization, religion among the people ought to be in particular danger: in the large cities of developing countries in the context of 'globalization' (Robertson, 1992).

### **Popular Religion in the Face of Secularization/Globalization**

Likewise enjoying a growth spurt are studies on the urban popular religious expressions of the Great Traditions such as Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, but also in Latin America and the Caribbean region, the such different expressions as Evangelical movements, Pentecostalism and the Afro-American and Native urban syncretic cults, the spiritist, diverse sects and even various New Age urban popular expressions. In fact, the deep religious sense of the popular masses would seem to undercut sociological theses that posit the teleological and irreversible nature of an intrinsically secularizing capitalist development, especially in the great metropolitan cities of developing countries.

Many studies done in the context of peripheral modernization of developing countries of the Third World show the absence of an outright tendency to secularization. The data indicate that a certain proportion of the population is influenced by secularizing currents (in the classical sense of the term, i.e. as determinative of a decline in the weight of religious symbolism in the makeup of cultural models in daily and public life alike). However, the data also demonstrate that this secularizing phenomenon occurs as a mere countercurrent to the central trends. As we have shown for Latin America (Parker, 1996), the central trend consists, on the one hand, of the persistence (however eroded) of the Great Religious Tradition – specifically, Catholicism – and, on the other hand, of the growth of new religious expressions of various kinds, especially among the popular masses. It seems that, in the context of underdeveloped societies subjected to peripheral, heterogeneous, uneven modernization, the religious element (instead of being stifled) is transformed.

In which way and with what effects? How are the social actors – especially those of popular origin – playing their role in this dynamic? This article reflects on these questions, taking into account especially Latin America's religious field and its dynamics.

Some theories argue that, in many modern historical contexts,

technological development by itself cannot be assimilated to secularization. Just as in Islam, in many Arab countries, or in the developed or such newly industrialized countries of Asia as Japan, Korea, Taiwan or Hong Kong, the impact of advanced technologies has worked no detriment to the hegemony of religion in society. Secularization tends to occur in these countries and in Latin America mostly by way of the development of a consumer society and a consumer propaganda that attempt to make life into a market, functionalize it, and introduce into it an instrumental rationality. Bureaucratization of society, secular political ideologies, the school system and the media, which today reach into the furthest corners of society, go hand-in-hand with that secularizing effect of the market (Berger et al., 1973).

Accordingly, the irresistible impact of modernity increases in inverse proportion to the weakness and fragility of the religious basis of social legitimation. Given commonsense prejudices towards religious 'folklore', the 'picturesque', 'extravagant' and 'vulgar' elements of the religion of the people, one would suppose, for instance, that modernization in urban metropolitan areas of developing countries would efface the religious spirit or at least soften its imprints on people's lives. The expansion of education would spread religious indifference, as well. Thus the secularizing tendencies of modernity would fill all vacuums of ignorance and challenge irrational patterns underlying popular religious expressions.

On the contrary, however, the historical and empirical evidence tends to support Dussel (1986), who argues that the Latin American people in their daily lives construct the meaning of their world and lives not from the educational system and culture of the mass media, or even from political ideologies, but from their own particular religious forms. So the religious sense and feeling among popular classes and lower social strata are constantly being reproduced and reconstructed in a very complex process that is not completely determined by structural variables, nor solely by the religious creativity of the social actors. In addition, we must recognize that the secularization process involves in itself a series of contradictions which prevents it from effecting the irremediable loss of all religious sense in the life of the popular classes in developing countries.

### **Popular Piety and Sociological Mirror**

'Popular piety' or popular religion is of increasing interest to scholars today, because it makes up one of the most important defining facets of the cultural models and cultural identity – as well as a key element for understanding cultural and political clashes coming from the globalization process – of the peoples of the Third World. 'Popular religiousness' was an object of study that long ago aroused the interest of Western Christian

churches – priests, missionaries and theologians. In the 1970s, it became a topic of heated intellectual debate. The new appreciation of popular religion made by the Catholic Church in Latin America (Johansson, 1990; Gonzalez and Irarrazaval, 1993) rekindled polemics concerning the ‘cultural substrate’ of the continent and the actual or illusory influence of the secularization process. From a sociological point of view, the principal challenge comes, however, from the fact that the cultural and thinking patterns of popular religion<sup>3</sup> are rather foreign to the academic and intellectual language, practices and worldview of the ‘social sciences’.

Whenever sociology fixes on cultural and religious reality as an object of study, it tends to generate a process of epistemological contradictions. In order to study these realities from a scientific approach, sociology reduces their complexity to analytical and functional categories. But in so doing, rendering the study feasible, at the same moment it renders adequate understanding impossible. Since its origins in Comtian positivism, Durkheimian functionalism, Marxist materialism, and even Weberian rationalistic comprehensiveness, sociology has posited the problem of values and ideal components of the social world in terms of dependent variables of ‘social factors’. Even apart from any philosophical consideration, sociological rationality, on the strength of its methodological logic, has a tendency to a certain reductionism when it comes to values, the aesthetic and the religious. The problem appears to reside in the Western rationalist Enlightenment premises shared by all of these focuses. At the moment of grasping, explaining and understanding the complexity of the profound ‘mystery’ of the religious – especially so of popular religion – they show themselves to be insufficient. If we review most of the conceptual framework of North American sociology and Marxist sociology – very important inputs to Latin American sociology up to recent decades – we can conclude that both of them are of a common stamp. In the one, as in the other, religion belongs to the stage of pre-awareness, of pre-Enlightenment: ‘In a word, religion does not belong to modernity. If there is religion in modernity, it is simply an obstacle to the development of the latter, or as a fetish impeding its full realization’ (Morande, 1984: 138).

What is involved here is the capacity of our social sciences, in their current state, to apprehend in holistic fashion the reality of religious symbolism among the Third World peoples. Could the social sciences’ modernization paradigm be altered? Without pretending to have a clear or satisfactory response, we have to remark that this is one of the principal challenges we face when we try to study and interpret the ‘different logic’ that I try to show in this article is present in different expressions of popular religions throughout the world.

During the last decade we have observed a renewal of the sociology of religion in Latin America (Mariz, 1994; Parker, 1994). In this renewal we

can appreciate a change of objective, focus and attitude. Adopting a much more favourable view of the religious and cultural expressions of the people, sociology is forthrightly incorporating the culture and subjects of the social dynamics as an object of study, discarding the structuralist framework of previous sociological approaches to this phenomenon.

The new attitude is the function of a quest for the understanding of popular identities. It also stems from a rebellion against the cerebral, anti-emotional formalism of the Enlightenment, which is reflected in technologically repressive rationality of globalized capitalism. In the so-called 'postmodern' intellectual climate in Latin America, the rediscovery of the popular cultures' potential for protest and resistance, real or virtual, goes hand-in-hand with the search for new scientific concepts and paradigms. As a consequence of this new intellectual climate, the number of studies on different expressions of formal or informal popular religions and cults has grown considerably.

Religion is being regarded, not only in its functionality, but also referred in its content; it is being analysed in its structural and historical context (Houtart, 1989). But the content is not to be defined by the sociologist (under penalty of slipping into theology). Popular 'faith' must be analysed as a religious phenomenon, in all of its symbolic density. It requires a framework of sociological focus that values the substantive element of culture, but that also takes the supernatural solely as an enunciated reference that is rendered symbolic reality by its actors themselves, not as a reality with an extrasociological density of its own. Generally, from a comprehensive sociological viewpoint, the religious phenomenon appears in the field of communicational significations and languages (Bourdieu, 1971) of a collectivity whenever that collectivity sees itself existentially confronted with a 'limit problem'.

From the standpoint of the rationality of the individual actor, this limit has to do with the reproduction of life on this earth and beyond it. It has to do with overcoming limitations posed by scarcity of resources and dangers flowing from contingency. From the standpoint of the collectivity, this limit problem has to do with situations threatening the collective life. This limit, experienced by the actors as a collective incertitude, calls accordingly for the establishment of a social nexus of a ritual symbolic order – a sacred cosmos – calculated to provide meaningful links that integrate the community and collective representations that furnish actors with collective meaning.

The concept of popular religion, as we are using it here, refers to the set of beliefs and practices arising from the intersection of a complex dynamic: (1) the dialectics between official religion (i.e. ecclesiastical religion) and popular religion (Vrijhof and Waardenburg, 1979); (2) dialectics between bourgeois and intellectual forms of religion and the non-Enlightenment

and/or illiterate forms of faith; and (3) the dialectics between the official and dominant culture (i.e. that of the dominant classes and elites) and the culture of the lower strata of society: poor people, workers and marginalized social groups of developing societies (Lanternari, 1982). Our present empirical reference is primarily the urban expressions of distinct popular religions (i.e. models directly affected by modernization processes) inscribed in a religious field where a universal religion (e.g. Catholicism or Islam or Buddhism) is hegemonical. The indigenous, rural and traditional-folkloric religious expressions – while still important – are less relevant for understanding the modern situation.

### **Popular Faith and the Meaning of Life**

The popular religion of Latin Americans is alive and well wherever they live. We find it in the countryside, in the high plateaux of the Andes as well as in the pampas and in the tropical forests; in the poor neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires, Bogota, Mexico, or in the immigrant 'Latino' communities of far-away cities of North America or Europe. We can recognize a very broad spectrum of its expressions – from classic 'popular Catholicism' to the new Evangelical cults, and including the many Afro-American and traditional syncretic indigenous cults.

The disparate popular rituals are surely different. The religious dances to the Virgin Mary (syncretized with the Pachamama, the 'Earth Mother') of the Aymara miners of the Andes (Bolivia, Peru, Chile) do not much resemble the frenzied worship and ecstatic glossolalia of the many Pentecostal cults of São Paulo, Bogota, and Quito. They also differ from popular rituals of Afro-Cuban *santería*, of Haitian voodoo, and the mass demonstrations of popular Central American Catholics who have made Archbishop Oscar Romero a veritable popular saint.

These phenomena are expressions of a very wide gamut of beliefs, but they all reveal one thing: the ability of the people, on the basis of their common sense, in the midst of their diverse situations and experiences, to recreate religious meaning. Just as it is impossible to speak of the 'popular worldview' as if it were one, consistent and single, so it is unthinkable to employ the category 'popular religion' in a univocal way. But the plurality is not absolute or chaotic. Still there exist some identifiable common traits, however resistant to typologizing, in the sense of a cultural grammar common to all subordinate social sectors. This argument helps us understand why we can state that the religious sense is part of the common popular sense. It is not, however, a static, archaic component; rather, it has a dynamism of its own, accentuated by changing historical circumstances.

Confronted by their subordinate social situation – misery, unemployment, hunger, social and psychological insecurity, exploitation and all



sorts of violence and danger, characteristic of their marginalized social condition – popular actors seek in religion the hope needed to continue living. The common sense of most people of Latin America (as well as presumably those of other Third World countries) hosts a secret hope in supernatural forces that signify a symbolic opportunity of survival and sometimes of cultural resistance, or a wellspring of security and meaning not found in other secular symbolic referents (especially not those proceeding from the official culture).

Popular religion accompanies the whole cycle of popular life. In Latin American culture, rooted in a five-century-long Christian religious tradition, the beginning of popular life is sealed by baptism; the origins and growth of life are often identified with the figure of the Virgin Mary; the progression of life is accompanied by a series of rituals for the stages of life. Life itself must be protected by many rituals of crisis and healing; and finally life must be celebrated in a series of religious festivals and patronal 'fiestas'. We must note the importance of 'rites of passage' (Van Gennepe, 1978) in popular religious practices. The religious rites accompanying the unfolding of various stages of life are baptism, First Communion, marriage and the funeral. But it is important to remember also all the original popular rituals – from autonomous non-ecclesiastical origins – that appear in different moments of collective life manifesting popular mysticism, together with its creativity and ludic spirit.

The passage of time, the different historical and geocultural roots, have been decisive influences in modifying the deep piety of nearly all the peasantry that constituted the majority of Latin America's inhabitants during the 19th century. In certain Andean regions or in Central American plateaux (especially Guatemala and the south of Mexico) indigenous roots are more accentuated, perhaps because evangelization was feeble, or because of the great influence of the high pre-Columbian cultures, or because of the loyalty to their traditions (almost in the form of resistance to anything else) of the Native Americans and mestizo peasantry.

On the other hand, there are distinguishable regions where Hispanic or Lusitanian influences have been more strongly preserved in the mixed culture, as a result of the fragility of local native cultures or an intensive *mestizaje* (i.e. hybridization) on the pampas and in the farming valleys. Furthermore, on the Atlantic coast of South America and in the Caribbean and Antilles, we sense the unmistakable influence of the African cultures of the population transported there as slave labour.

Urban expressions of popular religion share certain traits that set them apart from the more traditional religious forms of peasant origin. To the extent that the masses living in the *barrios* have recently emigrated from rural areas, popular piety among them still preserves purer traits of rural religious forms. But as the populace becomes settled in its urban habitat



and is socially and symbolically incorporated into the urban way of life, its religion is transformed. Nonetheless a rationalization of the beliefs does not always occur with the advance of urbanization. In fact, in many cases, magic and superstition undergo a revitalization. The growing influence of Pentecostal movements, Afro-American cults and religious magic in popular Catholicism demonstrates that urbanization in the context of economic underdevelopment can also spark transformations of the religious field that far from diminishing magic, symbolism and religious fervour, increase them by stimulating religious creativity among urban marginalized people.

In this urban context popular religion manifests itself as a religion of life. In urban popular Catholicism, faith is manifest in great and massive pilgrimages to shrines (e.g. to the Virgin Mary in various of her appellations, Jesus Christ, many saints and popular devotions) and in certain 'rites of passage', as we have shown, but not in weekly Sunday Mass attendance. A considerable part of popular Catholicism is 'non-practising' – not in the classical sense of a secularized faith, but in the sense that its devotions and beliefs develop independent of the official pastoral ministry and the various sacramental practices prescribed by the church as an institution. Nevertheless, after the renewal of the Catholic Church originated by Vatican Council II (1962–5) and the Latin American Bishops' Conferences,<sup>4</sup> a new panorama of popular Catholic expression in popular parishes began to be fairly common and the small-base church communities began to proliferate (Levine, 1996).

Popular Catholicism in the city is far less inclined to typical folk religious or mass expressions of devotion than it is in the countryside. Urban religion seems to become privatized, and other spheres of life take over the 'massive encounter' function: sporting events, secular festivals, political meetings and so on. But faith is very alive in daily life in families and in collective neighbourhood celebrations (e.g. Month of Mary, Palm Sunday, Holy Week, parish life), as well as in the new devotions and popular rituals in the cities (e.g. urban shrines, votive offerings, processions, urban folk beliefs and the like). Feasts of patron saints take on a different meaning in the city. It is a piety less overt and less expressive, therefore more difficult to recognize. But its deep roots and vitality strengthen popular neighbourhoods' sense of community and social links, in the face of adversities of the great megalopolis and its dominant culture.

Understood in the dialectics between society and community (Tönnies, 1955), it seems as though, in the contradictory modernization of the underdeveloped society, the community appears as a solid space of local urban culture where cultural traditions, marks of identity and cultural roots are reproduced. This process counteracts the abstract and universalistic tendencies typical of the deterritorializing process of globalization at

the end of the 20th century. Popular religion constitutes a key element in the production and reproduction of that community niche of the popular cultures submitted to the modernization process.

## Popular Religion as Counterculture

Popular religion, in many developing countries, is an ambit of symbolical-semiological condensation. In relation to thus defined transcendental reality, it manifests a mentality that imbues and helps constitute the culture of popular and oppressed classes and social groups. Popular religion can be better understood as a sort of counterculture to – not necessarily a social protest against – the ‘modernity’ of the dominant culture of globalized capitalism. This sociological nature of popular religion is manifested (in explicit or underlying fashion) on a number of distinct thematic levels. Although this article refers specifically to Latin America (with its largely, but not purely, Christian tradition), we think that these traits of popular religion may also be present in other religious expressions, such as popular Islam and popular Buddhism – a question certainly worth examining in light of empirical and historical evidence. The following themes characterize the countercultural thrust of contemporary popular religion.

First, popular religion affirms *life* in a violent and unstable socio-economic and political context that daily threatens the survival of popular masses. Popular culture itself is shot through with criminal, sexual and family violence. Because of social domination and uneven development (political instability, repression, civil wars, drug traffic, terrorism, etc.) the social system is also a threat to survival. Expressing profound collective yearnings, popular faith asserts a vital project of protection, survival, affirmation of and growth of life, all the way to its culmination in full, festive life, the ‘afterlife’, the ‘glory of Heaven’, a life in God without suffering.

Second, popular religion, in many of its manifestations, affirms *woman* and a *feminine* viewpoint in face of a patriarchal official culture and ecclesiastical subculture. Through the central position of Marian faith and the central role of women as mediatory agents associated with good and health (e.g. the roles of ‘healers’, ‘blessers’, ‘midwives’, ‘prayers’), often associating the feminine gender with nature, fertility and Earth in rural context linked to the gestation, growth and protection of life, popular faith is opposed to patriarchal and *machista* cultural domination. Machismo is surely a popular cultural model in Latin America, but the centrality of the maternal and feminine in popular religion acts as a counterpower – the maternal face of God – that implicitly restores woman’s equality and rights.

Third, popular religion affirms the feelings, the pathos, yet also the tangible, the concrete, in the face of a dominant culture that is intellectualistic

and moralistic. The importance of the saints and other mediators comes from their icons, not from their ethical example. The value of icons (e.g. the polychrome carvings of the saints, or the plethora of plastic or plaster figures and ornaments) lies precisely in the fact that they are concrete symbols of a transcendent reality. These symbols enable people to express feelings in sensible, corporeal fashion, pouring out the mighty charge of feelings accumulated by the popular mystical experience during the year, and expressing it on the precise date of the patronal feast. Its effectiveness is due to the capacity of the icon to catalyse feelings and desires in a precise time/space (through the element of marvel in fiesta and ritual), together with its mediatory capacity as efficacious symbol of a transcendent action upon living persons. What is important is 'that it be miraculous'.

Fourth, popular religion affirms the vitalistic in a world dominated by rationalism and intellectualism. This vitalism is related to the conviction that life is sustained in vital sources that are beyond human beings' rationalistic grasp. These vital forces may have many names: God, Virgin Mary, Holy Spirit, spirit of good, healing power, blessed souls and so on. In some types of popular religion, these forces of good are locked in a symbolic struggle with the forces of evil: spirits of evil, curses, spells, devils, satanic forces. But the satanic beliefs are of non-popular origin, for popular trust in the power of a God who is good makes it possible to restore a *nomos* where good always triumphs. For the dominant empiricist mentality, however, this vitalism is a threat to the dictates of 'reason' and must be combated as a vestige of 'archaism'.

Fifth, popular religion affirms the festive and carnivalesque over and against the formal bureaucratism of industrial dominant culture. We deal with a vitalistic religion both from the point of view of its contents (i.e. semantics) and its rituals (i.e. semiology). Popular expressions manifest a profound vitality in their eloquent ritualism, iconic exteriorization and deep collective mysticism of its practices. Thus they stand over and against a more ethical or ascetical religion (monastic or Calvinist) or the more abstract, rationalized individualistic mysticism of the dominant strata and classes (Troeltsch, 1931).

Sixth, and finally, popular religion affirms the transcendent in the face of a dominant culture still very much imbued with Cartesian and positivistic scientism. The rejection of symbolic dimensions and mystery as outside the sociocultural reality does not affect popular religion and culture; rather, it affects the parameters of judgement of the dominant culture with regard to such 'occult' reality. For that very reason popular religion permits us to regard the classical theories of 'secularization' as 'ideology'. Secularization theories fail to take into account the metamorphosis of religion in contact with modernity.

## Syncretism, Popular Thinking and Modern Rationality

The type of popular religion we are studying here – mostly reproduced in urban and modernized panoramas – presents itself as a religion of life rather than a religiously inspired ethic or a rational faith. Unlike the religion of reason characteristic of the intellectual elites and clergy, popular religion is a religion of rites and myth, of dreams and emotion, of body and the quest for this-worldly wellbeing. But what the empirical data have shown is that modern popular religion is not superstition and archaic magic.

Rather than being a manner and spirit of acting – an ethos – popular religion is a manner of *feeling and expressing*. We may assert that popular religion is at the core of popular pathos. Nevertheless, it is *not* a way of being and of feeling, a desire and a culmination of that desire, in conformity with the formulae of rationalistic, Western canons. It is surely a different logic, another way of feeling, thinking and praxis. Its logic is an alternative to Enlightenment rationality and the kind of rationalized faith that is its byproduct.

Popular culture is much more symbolic, dramatic and sapiential than the enlightened, intellectual, educated and scientific dominant culture. With all its 'popular wisdom', popular culture produces and reproduces faith, rituals and religious expressions in its own symbolic framework. It functions in a different cultural pattern, a different logic – by no means an anti-logic, an irrational mode of thinking, or a primitive state of the faculty of thinking (thus, it is not 'prelogic' in Lévy-Bruhl's [1977] sense of the term). Rather, it represents the use of reason under other conditions and under another system, one much more empirical and symbolic, and also much more sapiential and dialectical, than Cartesian and positivistic reasoning.

Perhaps the type of reasoning we are describing is in the foundation of syncretism. Often anthropological and sociological studies of popular and native religions have characterized these by their syncretism. In fact, religious syncretism is a common trait to nearly all modern popular religious manifestations. As we know, the concept is used to refer to the complex phenomenon by which two religious systems enter into contact without the production of either an absolute synthesis or a mere juxtaposition of elements. Etymologically the word means 'to act like a Cretan' and was used in the Hellenistic world to denote the inclusion of foreign gods in one's own pantheon. In Latin America, the syncretism of popular religious expressions has formed from the dialectical interaction of two or more systems in contact (Christianity, indigenous religions and Afro-American religions). This dialectic has resulted in neither the persistence

nor the total disappearance of either original system but, rather, either their synthesis or a reinterpretation of one of the two. Marzal (1986) suggests three types of reinterpretation: (1) the Christian rite is accepted and given an indigenous meaning; (2) the indigenous rite is preserved and given a Christian meaning; and (3) the Christian rite is accepted, but new meaning is added to its original meaning.

The syncretism analysed by Marzal is exclusively religious and is thereby susceptible to a more precise analysis. However, when we speak of syncretism with regards to popular culture and religion, we are referring to a whole complex way of thinking, the manifestation of a thought structure that obeys neither the canons of traditional mythic thought nor those of modern scientific and technological thought. With 'syncretic thought' we mean not only the objectifications manifest in a content but also, at a deeper level, the whole process operating within the popular collective mentality. Although this kind of thought could be investigated in a manner analogous to that in which myths or scientific postulates are studied (Godelier, 1977), its study is more complex. We are dealing with a process of symbolic work of an 'informal' nature, in terms of which the popular imagination constructs or reconstructs systems through the use of various residues, discarded material and new contributions, all seemingly disparate, in such ways that, out of a composition of old and new works, new syntheses are produced. This symbolic production, of a *bricolage* ('tinkering') type, is rather far removed from the rational, formal, planned and systematic production of concepts of intellectual thought that employs contents of ideas previously criticized.

One remarkable feature is the frequent recurrence of paradoxes in popular discourse. It is characteristic of the various popular religions' expressions that they are the fruit of the confluence of two different planes: the properly religious plane, which is subject to the dynamics of the religious field, and the plane of popular thought, which is subject to the popular forms of symbolic representations and linguistic expressions. This is why the coexistence of magical and modern scientific rationalities – observed in modern popular religion – must not be considered as an expression solely of the religious field. It is the reflex of complex processes of symbolical interaction and sociological influences which pervade the collective mentality of the popular masses and which, in a certain measure, constitute it in its various models.

Popular religion, in its diverse manifestations throughout developing countries, although a counterculture to modernity, nonetheless, cannot be considered a 'postmodern' cultural expression. In a certain sense, this meaning-core of popular culture and religion is both modern and not. It coexists with and profits from the modern, but it resists and criticizes the modern, as well. Popular culture and religion can be considered as

'hemidernal' (semi-modern), to use a neologism coined in a previous work (Parker, 1996). This character conditions its ambivalent attitude: popular religion is both anti- and pro-modernistic. Popular religion is anti-modern when it comes to the alienating component of modern instrumental rationality, to the legitimation of domination and its tendency to diminish life in the frenetic race for consumption and competition. But in another sense, popular religion is not anti-modern. Popular culture and religion accept everything modernity has to offer: effective improvement in living conditions and in opportunities for social development, as well as liberation from the fear and uncertainty of an oppressive life and often from traditional myths of submission. This *openness* of popular religion to modernity is not an essential quality. It is an enabling condition given in historical form – dependent both on the coordinates of time/space and on the collective actor and his or her socio-cultural experience. What we have said permits us to understand why, in Latin America, in the course of modernization, in the heat of its contradictions, there is no longer a 'traditional' popular religion per se. Nor is it possible to speak of a 'liberative' popular religion in the categories of an Enlightenment culture. There are only various 'hemidernal' religious forms and models, each endowed with a greater or lesser humanizing potential, depending on each sociocultural and historical context.

### **Different Social Functions and Concrete Historical Dynamics**

In the people there exists an entire, inexhaustible wellspring of religious creativity, which is, of course, not immune to the various influences of both structural and historical conditioning of society as a whole. These influences must be considered in any scientific study of a concrete manifestation of popular religion. However, one of the key recent historical influences proceeds, not only from global social change, but also from the process of change at work within the religious field itself challenged by modernity and globalization.

Popular religion as a general concept must be assumed to be an ideal-typical construct. Nevertheless, historical and social influences have produced a constant heterogenization of religious representations in different popular religions' manifestations. An in-depth analysis of urban popular discourse with reference to the religious ambit reveals the existence of distinct religious models, even in the same popular religious expression (i.e. popular Catholicism reveals different beliefs and practices depending on several conditioning factors). It is a question of the combination of semantic categories that shape typical codes of consistent sets of religious



meaning and practices. Each code is a model manifested in original popular grammar and vocabulary.

The historical development and structural heterogenization of the modernization process in developing capitalist countries give rise to a plurality of cultural and religious expressions. This process affects the religious field such that it now presents many diverse religious alternatives (i.e. different churches, new religious movements and sects, etc.), and in turn it influences the different expressions of popular religion, thus further increasing pluralism. While globalization creates a tendency towards homogenization of markets and consumerism in global culture, in peripheral modernity the religious field fragments and diversifies. Many of these expressions must be interpreted, as we have shown earlier, as a counterculture to modernity and globalization.

But the thesis that popular religion is a form of cultic religion, diametrically opposed to an Enlightenment logos, fails to comprehend the phenomenon in all its aspects. Popular religion is also a kind of religious 'word' pronounced upon life and history, even though it is not expressed in terms of Western logos. In popular faith we can surely find a whole popular theodicy. It defends a God of life. It believes in a firm possibility of the passage from evil to good, from precariousness and desperation to wellbeing, from disease to health, from less human situations to more human situations, from death situations to life situations. To a large extent, popular religion, in its urban manifestations – transformed by capitalistic modernity – continues to be the vehicle for what Weber identified as essential attributes of religion: it is an ethic of compensation, whose particular need is for deliverance from suffering (Weber, 1964: 394). Of course, this interpretation of popular religion as 'compensation' could lead directly to the conclusion that its function is an alienating one, an altogether questionable conclusion based on an abusive generalization. An empathetic interpretation of the 'compensatory' significance and function of popular religion certainly leads us to conclusions of a different kind.

The popular faith described here is not 'alienating' in the sense of being a 'sigh of the oppressed creature' (Marx and Engels, 1979), inhibiting all human action in the heteronomous hope of a 'miraculous' intervention of God. The subject has to act, not just ask. The subject acts ritually in the reference to the transcendent, but the action does not stop there. That ritual action is also accompanied by social action bearing upon the 'secular' ambit (e.g. looking for work or going to a doctor). But the subject trusts in the intervention of the transcendent powers because he or she knows that the foundation of life is beyond, and not in his or her own autonomous capacity. We do not confront here an 'Enlightenment' consciousness in the sense that the latter is correctly applied (by Weber) to the bourgeois and the proletariat, each of whom claims and strives to conquer the world in

his or her own way. Nor are we before a superstitious mentality whose conviction is in the immediate, mechanical result of its magical manipulation.

One could speculate about the authentic character of 'protest' connected to the manifold, heterogeneous manifestations of popular religion. There is a current debate over whether the various religious manifestations among the people – especially the more traditional models where magical traits abound – are merely utilitarian and pragmatic. Weber has declared that the more a culture is inclined towards a peasant traditional culture, the more withdrawn popular piety is from any ethical rationalization, and the more it becomes ritualistic and pragmatic. However, all the studies on popular religion, at least in Latin America, demonstrate that – even in the case of maximal expression of utilitarian magic – the problem of meaning (the ways of 'salvation' as substantive demands of the masses) is present. The theodicy we find in these expressions is not always rational and systematically developed, but always expressed by their religious leaders, shamans, mediums, priests or ministers. It poses the question of what things 'mean' and makes people enter in a new way, which will lead them far away from their unconscious, intuitive life. Of such questions, Cassirer (1964: 32) stated:

It verifies why and whither, it seeks to understand whence they have come and to what end they tend. The response that it gives to all of these questions can seem inappropriate and absurd. But what is important here is not so much the answer as the question itself.

On the other hand, we must recognize that not everything obeys symbolic strategies of survival, pragmatic and magical rituals, mechanisms of submission and domination. In the religion of the people, not all things are so readily objects of manipulation by religious or even political authorities.

In the subsoil of the popular edifice of religious symbolism, awaiting an appropriate moment to intervene, lie the hopes, fervours and religious energies of the masses. They take the form of messianism, propheticism and millennialism with its chiliastic raptures; magic and its mystery secrets, with their symbolical efficacy and power; popular religious festivals and multitudes of rites and pilgrimages, with their transgression of established norms; and turbulent sessions of possession, trance and glosolalia and collective exaltation. All of these relatively autonomous religious counterforces represent a subversive threat to the symbolic status quo. We are dealing with enormous energies, held back as if behind dams. Like any other energy reserve, when released, the religious energies of the people are subject to an ambiguous and, at times, contradictory destiny: well employed, they can be the source of inestimable human progress, but if they overflow spontaneously and explosively, they can unleash fanaticisms, with fatal and devastating consequences.

The religion of the subordinated classes in peripheral countries has a variety of social functions, depending on its articulations with other socio-cultural representations and corresponding to each class situation. These present themselves sometimes exclusively, sometimes in parallel, and sometimes can even coexist in contradiction within the popular culture. They are a factor of alienation, a factor of popular identity, of symbolic indictment of official culture and religion and, finally, of ethical reinforcement for a project of raising social status or for a project of social change.

### **Final Thoughts**

Modern popular religion, in its diverse manifestations, can only be rethought and interpreted against the background of accelerating globalization. In the light of what we have set forth earlier, there is not, in modern society, a linear, progressive process of secularization nor a direct and mechanical process of homogenization of culture and religion. The cultural field – as much as the religious field – is exploding with new contradictions giving life to a plural world. True, modern societies tend to speak a common language, but – at the same time – monolithic culture and religion no longer characterize the many peoples, nations and ethnic groups of the world. New movements are demanding the ‘right to be different’. Groups jostling for space by virtue of their ethnic or national identity, their gender or age and their religious or philosophical persuasions are springing up everywhere. In this context popular religion is reproduced and new models, sets of practices and beliefs and different expressions are diversifying the popular religious panorama. They are expressions of emerging popular cultures – subjugated millenarian cultures that are waking from their lethargy; cultures of newly poor and oppressed classes and groups that are partially shaking off their cultural alienation. Beneath this cultural dynamism are processes leading to structural heterogeneity that make it possible. Its main impetus, however, comes from the mentality of the religious producer – the popular subject.

We have stressed the ‘different logic’ of popular mentality that is a key intellectual tool in building the diverse popular beliefs and rituals. We will find an adequate explanation for this special type of thinking and acting far distant from current social scientific conceptual frameworks. But in order to advance in our research we must recognize that sociology is more than a ‘science’ in the positivistic sense; it is also a ‘human science’ and, as such, must include concepts that broaden its scope to include areas not altogether open to ‘explanation’ in a functionalist or structuralist sense. Sociology’s field is comprehensively hermeneutical, as well. Popular religion – as manifest in contemporary developing societies – represents a special field of observation. Since experimentation is impossible in the

social sciences, such a phenomenon at least has the virtue of showing the emergence of popular 'mentalities' subjected to exogenous influences, changes and strong pressures flowing from the fact of being situated between the traditional culture and the modern and 'postmodern' culture of city, science and the market.

### Notes

1. See Johansson (1990), Gonzalez and Irarrazaval (1993), Parker (1996) and Soneira (1996).
2. See Devisch (1996), de Surgy (1996), Hourmant (1989), Amaladoss (1989), Semporé (1986) and Waardenburg (1979).
3. 'Popular religion' is a far more appropriate sociological concept than 'popular piety' or 'popular religiousness'.
4. These Conferences were held at Medellin (Colombia) in 1968, at Puebla (Mexico) in 1979 and in Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic) in 1992.

### References

- Amaladoss, M. (1989) 'Popular Religion: Some Questions', *VJTR* 53: 357–69.
- Berger, P., Berger, B. and Dreitzel, H.P. (1973) *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness*. New York: Random House.
- Bourdieu, P. (1971) 'Gènese et structure du champ religieux', *Revue Française de Sociologie* XII: 295–334.
- Cassirer, E. (1964) 'La función del mito en la vida social del hombre', in I.L. Horowitz (ed.), *História y elementos de la sociología del conocimiento*, Vol. II, pp. 24–35. Buenos Aires: Editorial de la Universidad de Buenos Aires.
- De Surgy, A. (1996) 'L'Eglise de Fa au Bénin', *Social Compass* 43(2): 209–24.
- Devisch, R. (1996) 'Healing Hybridity in the Prophetic Churches in Kinshasa', *Social Compass* 43(2): 225–32.
- Dussel, E. (1986) 'Popular Religion as Oppression and Liberation: Hypothesis on its Past and Present in Latin America', *Concilium* 186 (August): 82–94.
- Godelier, M. (1977) *Horizon, trajets marxistes en anthropologie*, Vol. II. Paris: Maspéro.
- Gonzalez, J.L. and Irarrazaval, D. (1993) *Catolicismo popular, história, cultura, teología*. Petropolis: Vozes.
- Hourmant, L. (1989) 'Ascèse, rationalité, modernité en contexte oriental', *Social Compass* 36(1): 83–94.
- Houtart, F. (1989) *Religion y modos de producción precapitalistas*. Madrid: Instituto de Estudios para el Africa y Latinoamérica.
- Johansson, C. (1990) 'Religiosidad popular entre Medellín y puebla: antecedentes y desarrollo', *Anales de la Facultad de Teología*, Vol. XLI. Santiago de Chile: Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.
- Lanternari, V. (1982) 'La Religion populaire. Perspective historique et anthropologique', *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 53(1): 121–43.
- Lévy-Bruhl, L. (1977) 'L'Âme primitive', *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 43(1): 19–23.

- Levine, D.H. (1996) *Voces populares en el Catolicismo latinoamericano*. Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones.
- Mariz, C.L. (1994) 'L'Affirmation des intérêts dans l'étude des faits religieux au Brésil', *Social Compass* 41(3): 355–65.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1979) *Sobre la religión*, ed. H. Assmann and R. Mate. Salamanca: Sígueme. (Originally published 1844.)
- Marzal, M. (1986) 'Análisis etnológico del sincretismo latinoamericano', *Cristianismo y sociedad* XXIV(88): 27–40.
- Morande, P. (1984) *Cultura y modernización en América Latina*. Santiago de Chile: Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.
- Parker G., C. (1994) 'The Sociology of Religion in Latin America', *Social Compass* 41(3): 339–54.
- Parker G., C. (1996) *Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America, a Different Logic*. New York: Orbis.
- Robertson, R. (1992) *Globalization. Social Theory and Global Culture*. London: Sage.
- Semporé, S. (1986) 'Popular Religion in Africa: Benin as a Typical Instance', *Concilium* 186 (August): 44–51.
- Soneira, J.A. (1996) *Sociología de la religión*. Buenos Aires: Docencia.
- Tönnies, F. (1955) *Community and Society*. New York: Routledge. (Originally published 1895.)
- Troeltsch, E. (1931) *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*. New York: George Allen and Unwin.
- Van Gennep, A. (1978) *Os ritos de passagem*. Petropolis: Vozes.
- Vrijhof, P.H. and Waardenburg, J., eds (1979) *Official and Popular Religion. Analysis of a Theme for Religious Studies*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Waardenburg, J.D.J. (1979) 'Official and Popular Religion as a Problem in Islamic Studies', in P.H. Vrijhof and J. Waardenburg (eds) *Official and Popular Religion. Analysis of a Theme for Religious Studies*, pp. 340–86. The Hague: Mouton.
- Weber, M. (1964). *Economía y sociedad*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica. (Originally published 1922.)

**Biographical Note:** Cristián Parker G. was born in Chile; he obtained his Doctorate in Sociology at the Catholic University of Louvain. He is currently Investigador at the Instituto de Estudios Avanzados of the Universidad de Santiago de Chile, and also Investigador/Profesor at the Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Contemporánea, Universidad Academia de Humanismo Cristiano. He has published numerous books on the sociology of religion and the sociology of development in Latin America, including *Popular Culture in Chile* (with K. Aman, 1991), *Cristianismo y Culturas Latinoamericanas* (with R. Salas, 1992), *Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America* (1996) and *Religion y Postmodernidad* (1997).

**Address:** Román Díaz 89, Providencia, Santiago, Chile. [email: cerc@rdc.cl or: cparker@lauca.usach.cl]