

THE POLITICAL AMBIGUITY OF LATIN AMERICAN POPULAR RELIGION

Abstract

This article will present some historical cases, some ancient, some very recent, of how such ambiguity of the religious forces and popular religiosity has played in Latin America. Through this case we will analyze how and why in “the popular” the same cultural phenomena can play sometimes a very conservative role, and then, in others, turn into a menacing power to the traditional social order. On one hand, it is a way in which conservative hegemony has captured the potential and will of the masses and used it to domesticate its claims (*opium of the people*). But in other cases it has stimulated the dreams and hopes, and has provided unexpected vitality to the people in their search for justice and better living conditions. The traditional aboriginal (pre-conquest) religions and worldviews, as well as new religious experiences brought by the slave trade and migrations sometimes provided myths and images that reinforced the liberating thrust of religious forces.

Keywords: Popular religion, Liberation theology, hegemony, aboriginal myths, popular culture, religious rebellions

The political dimensions of religion have always been a slippery subject. For certain social theories (i.e. Durkheim and others) religion has a cohesive role in society. From another angle, Marxist theories assign to religions an ideological evasive and masking role in order to conceal oppression. Within Marxism, A. Gramsci and his followers have signaled the complex role of religion in the formation of culture, seeing its ambiguity also offering a space of cultural resistance to domination. We can find through history how religious issues were also divisive and in some cases subversive. If this is true for all religions, it is even more so for popular religiosity. Popular prophets and martyrs can show clear examples of this.

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From crime victim to holiness

María Soledad Morales was a young low middle class girl, age 17, student in a Catholic High School in the city of Catamarca. She was not an outstanding student, was neither particularly religious nor pious, in an environment in which cultural Catholicism is the standard. She had not engaged in any political movement or was in any way a social activist; just an average provincial young adolescent. One morning, Monday September 10, 1990, she was found death in a roadside near Catamarca, capital city of the Argentinean province with the same name. The autopsy showed that she had died two days before (Saturday night or at dawn Sunday morning), because of an overdose of cocaine. The corpse was naked, had cigarettes burns, with blows all over her body, with clear signs of being raped and tortured. Her face had been completely disfigured in a horrible manner, to such a degree that her father was able to recognize her only because of an old scar in her wrist.

At first the police tried to downplay the crime, saying that it was the outcome of a misguided sexual promiscuous adolescent who joined a "black party". But the reaction of the population, guided by the principal of the school, the nun Marta Pelloni, prevented that the case could be easily dismissed. After several political moves and years of bureaucratic mishandlings, with different misguided investigations and local corrupt judges, finally (1998) a federal investigation showed that it was really a crime which included kidnapping, sexual abuse and drug trafficking, which involved, among others, the son of the local Chief of Police, the son of a member of the House of Representatives, and relatives of the city Major. An impartial jury condemned them to prison because of the crime, but it did not proceed with the investigation of the other levels of corruption implied².

But, while all this took place at a political and juridical level, at street level other things were happening. On one hand, thousands joined the silent manifestations that every week, through several years, paraded through the streets of Catamarca with banners claiming for justice against "the sons of the powers" (los hijos del poder). The manifestations were headed by the parents of María Soledad and Sister Marta. They were all praying in silence their Rosaries. The only sound was that of the feet on the streets and the humming of the whispered prayers. The force was in the people and their patience. Without any doubt, these manifestations moved the political powers to finally intervene and solve the situation.

On the other hand, a slow process of popular sanctification began. Little by little the place where the corpse was found became a sanctuary, and María Soledad was considered a popular saint, received offerings and prayers. Her suffering

2 For information on the case, see: http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mar%C3%ADa_Soledad_Morales (accessed December 2014)

was taken as a sign of redemption. Some people declared that they had received miraculous healing from the spirit of María Soledad. The veneration of María Soledad became a local cult.

This case is illustrative of many others that occur throughout all Latin America³. Popular religiosity picks up the most diverse peoples and situations and makes them into popular saints and devotions. Our questions are how and why this happens, and how they influence the political arena. Any attempt to find some common features in these popular sanctifications will meet several exceptions. A large bibliography on the matter, with several diverse hypotheses gives testimony of the difficulty to understand, from only one point of view, the complexity of the phenomena involved in popular religiosity. My understanding is, without any pretention of explaining the totality of the cases, that popular religiosity cannot be considered without taking into account the political and social underpinning of which it is also an expression. That is, even if the religious field has a certain dynamics and autonomy of its own, it can never be separated from the political realities and circumstances. The religious field and the political action purports what G. Agamben will name a signature⁴. The religious feeling and systems, on one hand, and social and political stands on the other, are not always consistent; they are full of ambiguities, contradictory in many cases, but profoundly related and never void of deep meanings.

The religious in popular sections

The word “popular” have different shades, and its meaning is not the same in English as in Spanish or Portuguese (the dominant languages in Latin America). To make clear what we are talking about, I pick up a working definition of popular cultures as: “systems of representation and practices that are built on situational interactions by those who have lower levels of participation in the resources of instrumental value, power and social prestige and in the mechanisms that enable adaptation and response to these circumstances, both collectively and individually.”⁵ This implies that we allocate the popular in a specific social stratum, which is characterized as those who “have lower levels of participation in the resources...” This is related with the distribution of goods in a given society, or, as J. Rancière will say, to those who have been deprived of their part⁶. In that sense, the “popular” sections of a society are those who have a claim over

3 For a larger description of the case of María Soledad and others similar to it see: Néstor O. Míguez, “The Nomadismo of the Popular and the Religious”, in: J. Reiger (ed.), *Across Borders*, Plymouth, Lexington Books, 2013, pp. 29-54, esp. 46-48.

4 “Theories of Signature”, in: *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, New York, Zone Books, 2009.

5 “Los sistemas de representación y prácticas que construyen en interacciones situadas quienes tienen menores niveles de participación en los recursos de valor instrumental, el poder y el prestigio social y que habilitan mecanismos de adaptación y respuesta a estas circunstancias, tanto en el plano colectivo como en el individual”, in: Pablo Semán, Daniel Míguez, *Entre santos, cumbias y piquetes*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Biblos, 2006, p. 24.

6 *El Desacuerdo*, Buenos Aires, Nueva Visión, 2007, p. 25. English: *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. University of Minnesota, 2004.

and against the elite that took for itself the power to decide, that have appropriated not only the majority of the goods of a society (physical and symbolic), but also the capacity to impose value and meaning, to declare what is valid and legal, who is able to formulate its own discourse and exclude that of others.

The popular, therefore, is not defined as an essence, as a virtue or as an established entity, or by the massive following of a given leader or celebrity. The popular is what is constructed and recognized as a representation of its confrontation with the hegemonic ideologies, even when it picks up partially in the same ideologies that it confronts, since the popular is not free from the influence of dominant cultures. But it is also dynamic, since it must be considered as a part in a relationship, always in tension, always formulated in a conflict that is, at the same time, the mark of its exclusion and the claim of its existence. The popular, in its meaning derived from "a people" (*populus*), forms an internal frontier separating the people from the power⁷. At the same time, that which is excluded is the very heart of a *populus*, its deeper identification mark. A people have things in common, and is divided and in conflict for that which they have in common. If there is nothing in common, there is not a people, it lacks any cohesive factor. But from the moment they have something in common, there is strife for the capacity to manage, own or dispose over that that is common.

These apply to the dynamics of religions as well. From the moment religion is a common good in society, as it represents shared symbols, rites, myths and experiences, something in which members of a social body partake together, it constructs a people (theologically, the people of God, the chosen people, the Church, a faith community, etc.). So, at the same time that a people identifies itself with those believes and symbols, they constitute a motive of division among that same people: there is a quest over who has the authority to establish the dogmas, to declare what is orthodoxy and what heretic, the validity of the rituals or the true interpretation of myths or Scriptures. Once again, an elite appropriates for itself the symbolic elements of that given religion, and that elite is set over against a "people" that is to submit to that power. Yet, that same power exists only and because of the people.⁸

We can see this early in Christian history. In Paul's letter to the Galatians (*circa* 66 C.E.) we have a documented testimony of the conflict: In the second chapter we read Paul's reaction when James and Peter want to set a limit to whom and how is part of the church. Paul is trying to show that once they have a common faith (in the Resurrected Christ), that is enough to constitute the people, while the party from Jerusalem sets a divisive line to that possibility, in the Jewish tradition. Some years later an official account is given, when a certain group is able

7 Ernesto Laclau, *La razón populista*, Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005, p. 99. English: *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso, 2005.

8 For the development of conflict within the religious field, see: Pierre Bourdieu, "Génese et structure de champ religieux", *Revue Française de Sociologie*, Vol 12, 1971, pp. 295-334; also: Otto Maduro, *Religión y conflicto social*, Mexico, CEE/CRT, 1980.

to establish itself as the internal power of the nascent Christian Church. In Acts 15 (about 30 years later) we have the outcome of the conflict: an authority is set who has the power to decide and impose its decision over the rest. It reviewed the conflict and gave an irenic account of the happenings. Thus, the prestige of Peter is guarded, as well of that of Paul, and the apostolic authority emerges as the established body able to enforce the validity of practices and doctrine. From there on we have an "official" Christianity and an official Christian history, and popular religion by the side. Not by chance this meeting in Jerusalem is afterwards called "the first Council" (word completely absent in the biblical text), thus validating the successive "Apostolic Councils" as authoritative. When the Emperor calls for a Council to calm the agitated waters of Christianity in the fourth Century, that religious authority becomes, of its own right, totally political. At the same time, in less formal circles, the people developed its own understanding of their faith, partially witnessed in the so called "apocryphal Gospels", full of legends and wonder stories, and the diverse heresies⁹. On the other hand, some new elites struggle to impose their own account, challenging the apostolic authority from other power positions, as the case of Marcion in the second century, or the Arrians in the fourth.

In the history of religions we can observe similar situations occurring in Islam, over the correct reading of the Quran, the different sources of power, etc. Almost every religion, major or tribal, has a record of the struggle for the appropriation of the symbolic and political supremacy it implies, as well as the confrontation between the religious, the economic and the political powers when they do not coincide.

So, from this understanding, popular religions and religiosity are claims of those excluded from that power, those who have been deprived of the capacity to include and present their own religious experiences and symbols as part of the common religion. Popular religiosity, thus, is a protest against the formal power over religious (and political) life. Yet, as it can also be appreciated, it can also become a way to adapt to the common religiosity as a way to gain some presence in the symbolic world of that given society. Thus, it "enable adaptation and response" to the powers that be, as these powers also find a way in which they search to control religious and political energy by co-opting the symbols created by popular "representations and practices", as our definition runs, to reinforce their own stand.

Popular religions in Latin America

When we sketch a panoramic view over Latin American popular religiosity, we can find some major trends, with many nuances and differences that we cannot

9 Probably "popular" Christianity in the first centuries spread more because of miracle stories and street preachers than because of the consistency of the doctrines. See: Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire A.D. 100-400*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1984.

examine nor describe fully in this brief presentation. In a more or less chronological order we can enumerate the diverse religious presence in the continent:

- The aboriginal religions prior to the European invasion
- Iberian Catholicism, brought by the conquerors in the XVI Century
- African religions, which came with African slave trade
- Evangelical migration and missions, mostly coming in the second half of the XIX and during the XX Century.

All these diverse waves have given place to different constructions of popular religiosity. And in all we will find the signs of transcultural syncretism¹⁰. Each of them has been transformed by its encounter with the others, and while the elites have tried to preserve and impose its own, the popular response has reformulated them to the new situation.

The religions of the original peoples were quite different between them, though the European invasion unified them under the mottoes of demoniac and superstition. From the moment Columbus set his feet in the continent, Western Christianity “discovered” what was later to be called the Americas as a mission field. Columbus himself considered that his name, Christophorus, –the Christ carrier – was a prophetic sign of his duty to extend Christendom to the new discovered lands and peoples. Mission and conquest were one, and the aboriginal peoples and their religions were the target. “Submit or Die” and “Convert or Die” were almost the same thing¹¹. From the start, politics and religion cannot be separated in what is now Latin America. Consequently, the religions of the aboriginal peoples and their rites became marginal, excluded and persecuted. and were able to survive only in secret or through the syncretism that made a conjunction of the traditional spiritualities with the new Catholic imposition.

The old shrines and temples were transformed into the churches of the newcomer’s faith. The Mexican Metropolitan Cathedral, to give one example, was built over a Temple dedicated to the solar deity Quetzalcoatl. Feminine deities were identified with the Virgin, as the case of Guadalupe in Mexico¹² or Caacupé in Paraguay¹³. They became the center of many devotions, in which the ancient

10 I am aware that the word “syncretism” resounds with a pejorative tone in theological ears. Yet, I want to refer to the anthropological phenomena of the encounter of the variegated religious symbols as they come together and mutually influence in very diverse manners. Every religion, when it surpasses its tribal frontier, experiences the force of syncretism, only to consecrate one particular syncretism as orthodoxy, and condemns the others as despicable.

11 This is clear from the reading of “El Requerimiento”. “The Spanish Requirement of 1513 (“El Requerimiento”) was a declaration by the Spanish monarchy of its divinely ordained right to take possession of the territories of the New World and to subjugate, exploit and, when necessary, to fight the native inhabitants. The Requirement was read in Spanish to the native people to inform them of Spain’s rights to conquest. Those who subsequently resisted conquest were considered to harbor evil intentions. The Spaniards thus considered those who resisted as defying God’s plan, and so used Catholic theology to justify their conquest.” The full text of “El Requerimiento” can be read in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Requirement_of_1513 (accessed December 2014).

12 Originally a vision of Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, a mestizo that received the vision, the message and the image in Tepeyac, an ancient place devoted to “Mother Earth”.

13 The Guaraní people had as main deity the Moon. The Sanctuary of Caacupé has the image of the Virgin standing over a crescent moon, with the horns pointing upward, and crowned with stars, thus representing a lunar deity.

rites survived as Catholic religion. They were at the same time a way of submitting, and yet not to renounce totally to their indigenous tradition. Resistance and submission coincided in one religious symbol, purporting the ambiguity of the religious and the political role in colonial enterprises.

There has been a certain discussion in the field of religious anthropology over the idea that syncretism is a way of disguising the ancient beliefs under accepted images, or if it is a language in which the new converts express their new faith in the imaginary of their traditional culture. This is only partially relevant for our point: what I want to illustrate here is that what was the religions of the aboriginal peoples and the Catholicism of the Conquerors gave place to a new division in the religious field, related to the political situation. Popular religiosity, in this case the aboriginal and mestizo people, created their own way of representations and symbols, through which they were able to express, at least partially, their claims (in these cases, the validity of their old beliefs, and with them their own social organization and identity). At the same time it was formulated in images and languages that gave account of the new colonial situation. This gave the dominant elite the possibility of co-opting these same expressions of faith into their own power structure. The development of the image of Guadalupe into the national Patron saint (or really, matron saint) of Mexico and the Americas is a clear example.

In this same case, we can see how the religious imaginary can become the sign of its own internal tension. "Guadalupe" owns the name to the image of the virgin considered the Patron Saint of Extremadura, the home land of the conqueror Hernán Cortés. When the priest Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla initiated the Mexican Independence War (1810), the cry with which his indigenous and mestizo army confronted the colonial forces was "Kill the Spaniards and long live the Virgin of Guadalupe!"

But aboriginal religions and spiritualities not only gave place to syncretism with the Catholic tradition. It also survived in many places, concealed from the eyes of the Inquisitors, or in peoples and tribes who had little contact with the conquerors –like in the Amazons– or who were more successful in isolating themselves from the Spanish invasion as the case of the Qom people in North Argentine, taking advantage of the particularities of the territory which made very difficult the penetration of the Spanish horsemen. These are relatively small groups who were reached or conquered only in the XIX and XX Century. Yet, given the characteristics with which we describe popular religion, they are to be included, in some way or other, within this ample category.

The survival of the ancient religions appears occasionally, for example, in some features of the Carnival feasts in Bolivia and Northwest Argentina. The Andean cults of Inti (the Sun) and Pachamama (Mother Earth) with what appears to be slightly modified rites, are still practiced in the region, in a curious overlapping with Catholic traditions. In this case it is not the mixture of the religions, but

simply that the same persons and communities practice one rite on some occasions, and others in others situation, or combine them when the occasion merits. So we have the same person (family) having their children baptized in the Catholic Church, and then celebrating the "Inti Raini" (the rebirth of the Sun) or joining the offerings and libations to the Pachamama. Or, Qom people who attend the Pentecostal worship but then resort to the "Piogonak" in case of sickness. There have being several theologians and philosophers that have tried to explain these practices, and find ways of giving coherence to this ambiguous world; but my own experience, over thirty years of work with aboriginal peoples, is that they simply overlap, like different geological layers which deposit one in top of the other. People and cultures resort to one or the other, or to both, according to the circumstances, without making too much a problem over the issue, to the scandal of orthodox priest or fundamentalist missionaries.

Yet, when issues of political identity or cultural assertion are at stake, these symbols reappear with all their might. The inauguration of President Evo Morales in Bolivia¹⁴, the first aboriginal person to lead a nation after the Conquest, was not celebrated with a Mass at the Cathedral in the capital city of La Paz, as the tradition indicated, but with a reconstructed Andean ceremony, conducted in the sacred place (ruins) of Tiawanaku (also, Tiawanaku)¹⁵ by native *yatiri* and *amautas*. It should not surprise that some aboriginal Lutheran and Methodist ministers also participated in the ceremony as community leaders, thought not in their pastoral role.

All this mixture, with the influence of other sources as well, with all its complexity, generates a new kind of Catholicism, that differs from the Iberian variant imported during the Conquest as well as from the liturgical and dogmatic trend that is cherished by the Vatican Curia. It is a kind of "popular Catholicism", always in change, with diverse ways of being according to local cultures and situations. It is a Catholicism of sanctuaries and processions, of particular devotions, always in the margins of the formal Church. It is the expression of the ways in which the marginalized reformulate their faith experience, and, because of that, it not always coincides with what the elite say that religious experience should be. Some parts of orthodox Catholicism question this kind of religiosity, others support it, and the hierarchies try to domesticate it to add to their own prestige and power. It can be an occasion for political protest, as was the case at the times of State terrorism during the military dictatorship of Argentina 1976-1983. During those years (especially since 1980) the National Federation of workers unions (Confederación General del Trabajo) organized processions to the Sanctuary of San Cayetano, known as the Patron of the workers, with banners claiming for "Bread,

14 January 22, 2006. Then reelected in 2009 and 2014, always with a clear majority of popular vote.

15 Ancient religious center of the tiawanakota culture, with temples dedicated to the Sun and the heavens, the earth and the underworld. The site is considered to have been built even before the Aymara and Quichua (Inca) cultures took over the place, some centuries before the Spanish invasion. The ceremonies were repeated in his two successive re-inaugurations.

Peace and Work" (Paz, pan y trabajo), clearly defying the autocratic government. But, some years before, the Dictator Juan Carlos Onganía (1966-1970) had also used the procession to the national Sanctuary of Luján to reaffirm his government dedicating the Argentinean Nation to the "Sacred Heart of Our Lady the Virgin Mary", appealing to an also very popular Catholic devotion.

We can also consider the role played by popular Catholicism in the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua. Base Communities and groups of the so-called "Popular Reading of the Bible"¹⁶ played a major role in the support of the guerrilla that overthrew the Somoza Regime. The presence of the priests Ernesto and Fernando Cardenal in the Ministry for Culture and Public Education respectively, and another priest, Miguel Scotto as the Chancellor of the revolutionary government¹⁷ show how much involved was this popular Catholicism in the political developments at the time. In this case, we should register that some local Pentecostal and other evangelical churches were also very much in support of the Sandinista government.

In some regions of Latin America the presence of the African religions is also very important. Northeastern Brazil and the Caribbean (both continental and insular) show the most prominent examples of this, though by now we can appreciate their influence throughout the entire Continent. These religious expressions came in as a "by product" in the slave trade. Obviously, the conditions changed and their beliefs were to be transformed under the new circumstances, giving birth to new cults, like the Voodoo in Haiti, the Cuban "Santería", or the Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda. They also show this double facet of integration and protest. We can see how they incorporate (duly transformed) Catholic saints and in some cases also some spiritual traditions of the American aboriginal peoples. Eventually, they can become integrated in the political calendar, like the case of the Jemanjá benediction of the waters in Northern Brazil, each February, where the presence of political leadership is a must for their carrier, even if they do not join the cult. But it is also a remainder of the oppression through which the black people came to these coasts. It is affirmation of their identity, and, in some cases, the "terreiro" (open air temple) becomes the meeting place for their communal and political gatherings. No leader of the African community in these countries will dare to go without the benediction of a Pai or Mai (priest, priestess) of their cult, without the protection of the Orishas (spiritual divine entities).

The influence of the African cults has, by now, widely exceeded the black community in Latin America. One can find "terreiros" (now in urban construc-

16 An example of this "popular Reading" in Nicaragua is the record of the Bible studies in Ernesto Cardenal's book *The Gospel in Solentiname* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis books, 1982. For a short history of popular Bible reading in Latin America see: Néstor O. Míguez, "Latin American reading of the Bible. Experiences, Challenges and its Practice", *Journal of Latin American Hermeneutics*, Year 2004/1 - Instituto Universitario ISEDET.

17 This participation of Catholic priests in the Sandinista government was much resisted by the Vatican, and Pope John Paul II scolded them openly for resisting his order to resign from the government. Fernando Cardenal was expelled from the Jesuit order (readmitted later).

tion) in cities like Buenos Aires, with a very small population of African origin, joined by white lower middle class families, or even some marginal upper class subjects. They are, of course, one of the preferred targets in any police investigation: the mass media largely contribute both, to their marginalization, and then to the prejudice developed by that same marginalization, that makes them first-class suspects of every crime. Yet, we can find a house of a Pai or Mai in almost every quarter of the city, mostly in the poor villages and favelas that surround the big Latin American cities.

Our panorama will not be complete without considering the presence of protestant migration and evangelical missionaries. In recent years there have been a significant growth of Pentecostalism in all Latin American counties, remarkably (but not only) in the lower classes. We will not consider "popular religion" the crusades of the North American preachers like Billy Graham or Luis Palau¹⁸, Yiye Ávila (who recently passed away) and others, though they can gather a multitude in their campaigns. It is also dubious if we can consider as popular religion some religious enterprises, like the Brazilian based "Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus", of the auto-proclaimed bishop Edir Macedo. But, in many neighborhoods we can find small Pentecostal and evangelical groups who reunite to pray, study the Bible, share their faith experiences, offering refuge to victims of domestic violence or helping alcoholics or drug addicts to overcome their problems. Untrained local leaders, with very little contact with the formal churches, play a charismatic role that gives them a chance to gather a following, which in many cases allows them to bargain some benefits from local authorities. Once again we find the ambiguity of a religious expression that gives way to the most vulnerable people to express their feelings and hopes, that offers them certain kind of dignity and contention, even creates the desire for social justice, and at the same time they become captive of a patron-client relationship with corrupt local politicians. Pentecostalism might be a form of popular Protestantism¹⁹, but this cannot be taken as a given: it depends on the degree in which local participation rebuilds its religious experience and forms community within the spirituality of Pentecostal tradition.

One particular case of the encounter of Pentecostalism as popular religion is those aboriginal peoples or groups that resisted Catholic conversion, but that afterwards become protestant (including Pentecostals), through the work of evangelical missionaries. From an anthropological standpoint it can be said that they found in the evangelical spiritualities more affinity with their own traditional cosmology, than with the Catholic. This is particularly visible in those peoples whose ancestral religion was more related to the protector Spirits in Nature than

18 Luis Palau was born in Argentina, but after converting to the evangelical faith he moved to the United States and became a citizen in that nation. He was a follower and collaborator to B. Graham, but afterwards he created his own association, based in North America, with the main target on evangelizing Hispanic America. He regularly visits different Latin American countries with his "Jesus Festivals".

19 See: Juan Sepúlveda, "Pentecostalism as popular religiosity", *International Review of Mission* Vol. 78, No. 309, 1989.

to metaphysical deities. My own experience with the Qom people of North Argentina shows this overlapping. Pentecostals emphasis in the manifestations of the Holy Spirit, glosolalia, worship dancing, that coincide with features of their own cosmology, facilitated the identification. It also permits to build a bridge between the indigenous culture and an accepted structure within white society. At certain moments they make use of the Bible and their new faith to confront the hegemonic white domination. The Jubilee laws are invoked in the struggle for their land, or the book of Daniel is quoted for bi-lingual schooling. Little by little they begin to criticize the theology received by the missionaries and to re-read the Bible in their own terms, for they are convinced that they also speak the tongues of the Spirit.

In recent years we can see also a form of Pentecostal Catholicism, in the Catholic Charismatic movement. Once again, we have to distinguish within the movement what is really popular, and what is simply a new trend of the dominant religion.²⁰

Popular devotions

Our panorama of popular religion and its political importance would not be complete if we do not consider the development of popular devotions. The case of María Soledad is paradigmatic of many others in which suffering and premature death is implied. Yet, in this and many other similar cases, this is not the consequence of the natural order, but of social and political circumstances. In most cases suffering is the outcome of power structures, of power abuse, of the asymmetry of social conditions.

People reflect, in popular devotions, their hidden desires and open frustrations. Popular devotions show those deep feelings, intuitions, hopes that they cannot express in other ways, but appealing to powers and forces that can compensate for the powers that impose that suffering over them. Popular outlaws, prostitutes, disabled persons, mystic heretics, unidentified corpses, or miraculous legends can give way to popular devotions. Deolinda Correa (la "difunta Correa") died of thirst in the desert of San Juan (Argentina). As a faithful wife she was following her husband when he was co-opted forcedly by a rebel army during the times of civil war in Argentina (1840). But several days after her death the baby she carried in her arms was still alive, suckling the milk from her breast. The legend gave place to a sanctuary where people today carry bottles of water to calm her thirst in exchange for sanity or other miracles. Irene del Carmen Iturra, known as "Botitas Negras", was a prostitute in the mining district of Calama, Chile, killed and disfigured in September 1969. Because of the horrendous crime it become cover story in many local, at first, and then national newspapers. The popular

²⁰ See, for example, the study by Juan Mauricio Renold, "El Padre Ignacio: sanación y eficacia simbólica", in: Renold, J.M. (ed.), *Miradas antropológicas sobre la vida religiosa*, Buenos Aires, Ediciones CICCUS, 2008.

indignation for the crime turned into a sense of piety and then devotion, and many miracles were attached to her name²¹. The site became also an expression of local cultural protest. On the other hand, slave Anastacia is venerated in Rio de Janeiro and other cities of Brazil because she refused to give up her virginity to the request of a powerful politician, who then punished her until she died (circa 1740). A sanctuary to her memory and miracle working power was erected two centuries later. We can continue listing many other cases in all Latin America. Some are legendary, and others dreadful carriers of disgrace like "La Llorona" or "San La Muerte", that must be honored in order to avoid danger or curses.

It is interesting to note that sexual abuse and gender violence is implied in most cases, thus many of these devotions have women at the center. Also we can see that vulnerable and disabled people are seen as sanctified when victims of abuse or prejudice, like in the case of "Romualdito", in Chile. Or "Gauchito Gil", of Corrientes, Argentina, who was killed by the police accused of robbery (1878), when really it was a vengeance, since he was the young lover of the wife of the local Chief of Police. Afterward the legend made him a kind of local Robin Hood, who robbed the rich landowners to share the booty with the poor. Sanctuaries with his name, characterized by a red necklace (which he used to wear) are all over Argentina and neighboring countries. In most of these we can see how popular devotions enthrone victims of violence. Unnatural death is almost a requisite for popular devotions. They express the violence of the power system, and are, in a symbolic way, an exposure of arbitrary force and a protest against its imposition.

Popular devotions cannot be systematized. In a way they are a protest against systematized power and religion. They express a moment of contestation against prestige as a religious virtue. In contrast with the official sanctifications of the Catholic Church, that include mostly people recognized by society or incardinated in the official church, or the heroes of the missionary enterprises of Protestant colonial forces, these popular devotions are a vindication of the excluded, of the marginal people who are ignored by the structures of social, economic or political power.

This is very clear in the case of Antonio Conselheiro. This lay prophetic and messianic figure of the Brazilian Northeast (Sertão) created a community of disabled people, runaway slaves, poor peasants, and the like, in the village of Canudos. It had an apocalyptic character, an egalitarian regime that questioned the authority of the recently created Brazilian Republic. In the repression of Canudos the Brazilian army killed over 15.000 of Conselheiros followers²².

21 For an anthropological study of the case see: Jorge Pavez Ojeda y Lilith Kraushaar H., "Nombre, muerte y santificación de una prostituta. Escritura y culto de Botitas Negras", *AIBR, Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana*, Vol 5, No 3, 2010, online: <http://www.aibr.org/OJ/index.php/aibr/article/view/52/54> (Accessed December 2014).

22 The story has been popularized in the novel by Mario Vargas Llosa, *La Guerra del fin del mundo*, 1981. In English: *The war of the end of the World*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984. Reprint by Picador, 2008.

This last example also offers us an explicit element that is contained also in other devotions: the eschatological character, the apocalyptic hope in bedded in popular religiosity. While in secular and illustrated circles apocalyptic language is disdained as mythology and fantasy, and in fundamentalist theology is a menacing message for the unbeliever, in popular religion is the expression of hope, a reversion of the present conditions that condemn the poor to permanent disgrace. They are already condemned by the present system: in their creative devotions they expect the glory they never experience, the plenitude that is always denied. At given moments in history that spiritual force gives way to political expressions, and the religious power concealed in them opens to essay new forms of expression in their claims and demands.

In conclusion, we can see popular religion from very different approaches and it constitutes a very complex phenomenon in Latin American reality. It has to be studied in its variety, and cannot be easily dismissed in a single overarching theory. Yet, whatever angle we want to explore, we will find that it is always related to the power structures of society, that it reveals the social tension created by oppressive political systems, that it certainly expresses the frustrations, claims and hopes of those who have being deprived of their part. That is, it constitutes a political voice, said in another language.

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ПОЛИТИЧКА ДВОСМИСЛЕНОСТ ПОПУЛАРНЕ РЕЛИГИЈЕ ЛАТИНСКЕ АМЕРИКЕ

Сажетак

Овај чланак ће понудити неколико историјских случајева, од којих су неки древни а неки скорашњи, који показују како се испољавала наведена двосмисленост верских сила и популарне религиозности у Латинској Америци. Анализираћемо како и зашто „популарно“ и истом културном феномену некада може играти веома конструктивну улогу док се у неким другим претвара у претећу силу традиционалних друштвених поредака. Са једне стране, то је један од начина на који је конзервативна хегемонија обухватила потенцијал и жељу маса, користећи је у припитомљавању њихових захтева (*опијум за народ*). Међутим, са друге стране она је и стимулисала снове и наде, нудећи једну неочекивану виталност људима у њиховој потрази за правдом и бољим условима живота. Традиционалне абориџинске религије и погледи на свет (пре освајања), као и нове верске традиције донешене трговином робљем и миграцијама, су некада нудиле митове и слике које су јачале нагоне за ослобођењем међу верским силама.

Кључне речи: популарна религија, теологија ослобођења, хегемонија, абориџински митови, популарна култура, верске побуне

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