

POPULAR RELIGIOSITY: A LIBERATIVE RESOURCE AND A TERRAIN OF STRUGGLE.*

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1. POPULAR RELIGIOSITY- A RESOURCE IN SOCIAL STRUGGLES.

1.1. Introduction

Popular religiosity is, like all religion that has emerged in the social history of societies, a social product (Berger,P.L. 1973,13ff). It is, however, at the present stage of the historical evolvement of societies, no longer possible to determine which came first, society or religion. What is apparent, however, at this stage of history is that religion, in one form or another, is so deeply entrenched in most social formations that it seems to have preceeded the earliest human social formations and is able to outlive even the oldest of them. We are by so saying, not denying the impact of religion in the further moulding and reforming of social formations. It admittedly exercises a considerable influence depending on the society in question. It is more influential in some societies than others.

Our own operative position on this matter is that religion is undeniably a product of society. But since society as we know it is not a homogeneous entity, it would be grossly insufficient to describe it only as such. We are, as a matter of fact, obliged to go further and add that, if we view social formations in terms of people's relations to the means and processes of material production, distribution and consumption, we have to accept that society consists of different classes, and that every class would therefore have its own religion. If, as it's the case in many societies like South Africa for example, the dominant religion (Christian religion) is an imposition, then that dominant religion in society will invariably exhibit all the characteristics of a religion of the dominant classes in that particular society. And if it is true that, as Marx says, the history of society is the history of class struggle, then contemporary religion will not only be a social product. It will be the social product that invariably emerges in the class struggle that rages in society and has its place and role in the cutting edge of societal processes as that society continues to be transformed. It emerges in the course of the struggle of a particular group or class to exist, to redefine its place in society and produce the means of subsistence as well as make sense of its existence.

2. POPULAR RELIGION IN SOUTH AFRICA.

2.1 Popular religion-old and new.

Religion as we saw above, can exist in a loosely or formally organized fashion or in an informal fashion depending on the relations of

domination in society. If the colonized people are completely dominated, their religion will be fully organized according to the pattern imposed by the colonizer. (That is necessary for monitoring and control.) If the colonized people are not completely dominated, that is, if they have some social space to do as they wish, their religion will always be loosely organized because they do not need to monitor and strictly control their religion like besieged people.

In organized societies, and during our age, most religions (in our case, Christianity) are highly organized, with hierarchies and institutions. Not too many forms of religion are not formally organized because most of the inhabited world is inhabited in an organized fashion. One of the types of religion that are not highly organized and have a place only at the fringes of a world of religions even though it operates at the heart of society, is popular religion as a religion of the poor masses.

In South Africa popular religion can also be understood in terms of the above mentioned theoretical frame of reference. As a matter of fact, many writers (from B. Sundkler to I.J. Mosala) on the African Independent churches (the traditional South African institutional home of popular religion), are agreed that the overwhelming membership of these churches are from the lower working classes of the black population be they urban industrial or rural agricultural workers.¹ This religion appeals more to these classes than it does to other classes of black people. In itself popular religion provides resources that enable the groups of classes referred to above to survive the stressful social, economic, political and psychological contradictions of an emerging industrial society that is permeated by aggressive racism. It also gives meaning and strength to the struggle of these weakest and most vulnerable sectors of the black population to exist, survive and go on with their daily struggles.

In South Africa, popular religion arose historically in the earliest unpleasant colonial meeting between European colonizers who used colonial Christianity to reduce the costs of conquering and subjugating the African population.(Magubane,B.M.p.55ff.) It arose in that social context as a means of cultural resistance to incursion, dispossession, subjugation and social disruption at that particular period in the social history of our country. As the social history of our people and our country continued to change and new challenges presented themselves, this religion also changed.

Its relevance and effectiveness should as such not be measured only in terms of challenges facing Black South Africans today nor in terms of the goals they are presently pursuing, but rather also in terms of the challenges which faced the indigenous population

and the goals which they had set for themselves at the time when a particular form of that religion emerged and rose to prominence. As I.J. Mosala correctly puts it, "Man's understanding and positing of divine reality must of necessity correspond in some important ways with the level of development of historical society. Many analysts of this religion make a twofold mistake to our mind, of firstly universalizing and eternalizing social challenges and goals of a particular historical era and secondly, assessing popular religion of another era in terms of those challenges and goals that are obviously foreign to the historical period in question. The result is a dismissal of the relevance of that religious manifestation. Other analysts do the opposite. They universalize a particular type of popular religion that emerged during a particular era and use it as a framework for dealing with different challenges and goals of another period in the social history of a people. The result is also a rejection of any new form or type of popular religion that emerges as a more meaningful accompaniment of a new social struggle.

The above problem has affected the theological debate in South Africa for some time. It has led to some analysts of religion insisting that the African Independent Churches, the traditional home of popular religion in our part of the African continent, should be accepted by all Black theologians as a useful context for theological reflection for our time and place. They are consequently surprised that all prominent Black Theologians disagree with them on this score and instead assert that these churches cannot form our context for theological reflection and that the result of their theological reflection cannot be African Theology as we generally know it. They are also surprised that Black theologians would not accept those churches as the exclusive sources in the formation of Black Theology.

What needs to be remembered is that, as a social product of a people who exist at a particular epoch or period in history, every popular religion bears the characteristics of that historical period. It, in turn gives a distinct mark to the comprehensive struggle of its adherents as they define their struggle during that particular historical period. It also bears the mark of its geographical and socio-cultural and political location. This location distinguishes it from other popular religions in other times, places and countries. It is well known that in the social history of South Africa this religion has manifested itself in different forms at different historical periods. Of the many forms of its manifestation, the African Independent Churches' religion is the best known to researchers of African traditional religion.

There are other less known and less recognized forms of this religion that are more modern and more effective at the present historical

period and that exist in tension with the religion of the African Independent Churches. Like the African Independent Churches, (AIC) they too emerged as modern forms of cultural resistance to the intolerable brutalities of a racist and capitalist social order of society. They are openly committed to overthrowing the present inhuman order and bringing into being a nonracial and nonexploitative social order. Unlike the former churches and their religion, they are more visibly confrontational and their theology more abrasive and consequently more effective and popular among very large sections of the politically conscious and active black Christian people. These religious formations are consequently starting to chip away at the outer edges of AICs as young people start to experience a religion that is reconcilable with their socio-political commitment and practice.

This religion has emerged as a timely and necessary solution to the dilemma which was facing the African Independent Churches and which leads to their inability to penetrate the black youth, especially the student sections, namely how to respond to the growing and justified critique of their lack of revolutionary relevance in a situation that cries out for it. It also succeeds to provide a haven as well as spiritual resources to those revolutionary workers who are presently at the forefront of the struggle against apartheid capitalism and its state but would not contemplate abandoning the Christian religion or making the choice between it and Marxism. (By the way, we have always been puzzled by a strange phenomenon of the lack of unity among the African Independent Churches as well as their rapid proliferation as churches of the lowest classes in society and their susceptibility to frequent splits on the one side and the coherence, unity and revolutionary vigour among their membership in their industrial organizations (trade unions) and activities. We have been asking why the workers who constitute the overwhelming membership of these churches and adherents of their religion are unable to stick together in church while displaying a remarkable amount of unity when engaging in industrial confrontation.)

The 1970's and 80's have ushered in a new revolutionary popular religion that operates within the context of the struggle for liberation as it is waged on the factory floor, in the classroom, in the city streets and dusty black townships. It is communicated through new hymns and choruses with a liberative content that places God and Jesus Christ at the frontlines of struggle where the crudest brutality of the police and the army is experienced. Its places of gathering are the soccer stadium, the steps of a cathedral, the open street, the small township house, the community hall, in front of prison gates or even in front of an advancing "hippo" (a police and army

vehicle) short, any place where black people gather to bring God into their struggle. The singing of freedom songs to the rhythm of modified African dance movements (toyi toyi) which come from the depths of the black ghetto's of our land, is an integral part of the new liturgy. Like the well known AICs, the theologically untrained industrial workers and peasants form part of the large force of its religious leadership. Unlike the A.I.C's religion, it is already showing an ability to unite and keep the struggling black working people of South Africa together and provide them with the necessary religious dynamic language, symbols and values as well as defend and legitimize their dreams and aspirations against a powerful and vicious state propaganda apparatus.

What may soon give cause for concern is the durability of the high profile leadership role that is played by some powerful leaders of historical churches in some formal occasions where this religion is practised. While their integrity and commitment to the socio-political goals which are supported by this religion may be beyond question, it remains to be seen how long they will successfully withstand the tension of operating in two mutually exclusive religious contexts. It is also a question as to which side they will choose if and when forced by their institutions to do so.

It is important to note that while the historical churches are providing the high profile leadership we referred to above, they are not the alternative home for this religion. They are not a substitute to the African Independent Churches churches we have been discussing. They too, as impositions with much doctrinal irrelevancies, liturgical rigidity and inflexibility, as well as very little space for innovation, are not a suitable context for this revolutionary popular religion. This is the only conclusion one can come to when one notices with amazement how even the powerful leadership of these churches abandon them and their official theology for the periphery of the established church where this popular religion locates itself, when it is time for a revolutionary religious practice. There is a general dissatisfaction about the above state of affairs in the established churches and a resistance to the tendencies of these churches to co-opt, and redirect whatever falls into their clutches instead of accepting the critique that is represented by this religion and transforming themselves, their theology, symbols and liturgy. The frequently given official support to the liberation struggle on the part of some of these churches is not enough to remove this resistance and suspicion. The ecumenical flavour and colouring of this religion does also not permit for such an institutional change of context.

It is the religiously neutral but politically well defined space outside of the official churches, be they Independent or Historical, that con-

stitutes the context for contemporary popular religion of liberation. Here on the fringes of the institutional Church, on small soccer fields and huge stadia, in the open air, in the commuter trains that ferry the huge army of black industrial workers to work, in the small homes and shacks of workers, in the streets where committed people lock arms together in face of the vicious police and army of the racist state, there is more than adequate freedom to practise a religion that brings together and merges elements of traditional African religious practices like dancing and a high emotional spirituality, liberative elements of African culture, like a strong sense of solidarity and sharing and a theology with a distinct political, economic and social agenda. This religion is rationally informed and this we wish to emphasize, by a social analysis of society that is critical as well as appreciative of the positive role of religion in society.

This is where the line of demarcation between the new revolutionary religion in South Africa and AIC religion in other parts of Africa as well as South Africa lies. When we criticize African religion and theology, as we have done before, it is on the basis of this above mentioned role of religion and culture. To us, religion does not exist for itself. It serves a clearly and consciously defined purpose of making people human and the world a peaceful and just home. Culture is also not the central concern of religion nor the goal to be pursued and realized. It is a source from which we tap what is needed for the enhancement of the struggle for liberation and justice.

2.2. Popular religion, mobilization and struggle

In a class and racist society, popular religion as a religion of the oppressed black people who constitute the overwhelming majority of the population, has to operate on the side of the oppressed and with their interests at heart and perform several functions.

Operating in the sectors of the population with a low level of literacy and lack of formal analytical skills, makes it incumbent upon the religious protagonists to utilize the tools of such religion together with formal sociological ones and publicly, in a prophetic fashion as well as that of the African songoma (spirit medium), analyze the societal processes and dynamics in order to enlighten the oppressed through the medium of a religious language they understand. It is necessary for them to clearly understand what God says about their situation and conditions of enslavement as well as God's involvement in social struggle and their place, role and participation in the light of God's involvement in their social struggles. This analytical work constitutes part of the sermon of the preacher.

All the preachers of this form of popular religion perform this function as a matter of necessity. Popular religion also functions

polemically in a religious field where the religion of the powerful and the rich claims hegemony. Its claims of exclusive ideological rule over the hearts and minds of the oppressed and dispossessed have to be challenged and denied openly and in public. In such circumstances, it is part of the struggle for religious freedom which is fought simultaneously with that for concrete freedom to enter this terrain and contest the exclusive claims of custody over religious truth that is made by the religion of the oppressor. This religious polemic against the religion of the powerful and the rich also serves as a necessary process of deligitimation of the right of the powers that be to rule with God's blessing. It strips their power of all religious protection, thereby removing all fear and respect for it. When popular religion, as a religion of the huge masses of oppressed people who are hungry for freedom, it can invariably become a very successful instrument of mobilization and legitimation as well as a source of cohesion and empowerment in the struggle for liberation of oppressed groups and classes.

3. POPULAR RELIGION: A TERRAIN OF STRUGGLE.

There is historically, overwhelming evidence to the fact that historical Christianity, conservative and progressive, as a Christianity that shares a common history of imposition on the colonized and dominated people also shares a common intolerance of every indigenous effort at religious creativity. Both wings of colonial Christianity have a hegemonic intolerance of other religions in their conquered spheres for influence. They consequently regard popular religion that exists as a cultural creation of conquered and vanquished people, as a great threat and a challenge to their long established regimes of truth and territorial spheres of influence and will oppose it as fiercely in the name of orthodoxy, as the state does, in the name of religious uniformity, law and order.

As we have just pointed out, these two powerful social institutions (the racist state and the historical church) provide different reasons for their common intolerance of popular religion. That the reasons for intolerance are different, does not make any difference as far as their actions on the religion of the masses are concerned. They both dislike it and combat it, using different means because they are both powerful institutions with a long history of periodical cooperation in certain ventures, in societies with a colonial past. In South Africa, Christian churches and other religious forces and institutions that are ideologically aligned to the state and share common material interests among themselves with the state, namely: maintenance of white superiority in politics and economic sphere, have operated against popular religion of the masses because it posed as a prophetic threat. This is among other factors, what prompted the emergence of the Kairos document with its severely

critical analysis of the church and theological situation and fierce attack on the theology of the church and the state.

We should realize that popular religion as a means of psychological and spiritual survival under conditions that are adverse to the survival of the weak and poor in society, will obviously be viewed with great suspicion by the powerful. As a form of cultural resistance to an order of society that does not promote the welfare of the underdogs it will inadvertently attract the attention of the state that is always coopted by the powerful ideological and economic forces in capitalist societies. The state is able to see very clearly that it does not perform an ideological role that is reconcilable with the one reformed by the institutionalized churches nor operate with the same kind of rules and regulations that allow for easy monitoring and control. As a religion that is not highly rationally organized like the historical churches, it is also difficult to bring under state control and manipulation because its programmes and course of action are not very predictable.

In South Africa the state has decided to make a direct entry into the sphere of religion, thereby violating its own rule of the separation of religion and politics. The purpose for this entry is nothing but to contest and, if possible, win the ideological space in which popular religion informs and controls, as it were, the hearts and minds of the lowest people in South African racist and capitalist society. This programme is carried out with a two pronged course of action. The state has launched a widely and highly publicized campaign of criticism of mass religion and its high profile leadership in a well calculated effort of deligitimation. It is clear that the ultimate aim is to cut off this mass religion from mass political action in order to deprive the latter of religious backing by the large force of black Christians.

The next form of state combat in which some conservative churches lended a hand to the state was that of trying to win over some elements of formally organized African Independent Churches (AICs) to their fold and using them against the other black church people and religious organizations. We have recently seen the appointment of bishops in the AICs who are well disposed to the government and their very swift rise to powerful positions within these religious organizations. They have access to state run and controlled television and radio which other black mass religious organizations do not have. They use religious language for the benefit of the racist state and against the best interests of our oppressed people. They also use the state communications media to delegitimize the struggle for liberation and cut off the connection between black Christianity and its social base in the black community and replace it

with a reactionary piety with no social commitment to the struggle of the oppressed. The former state president P.W.Botha cultivated cordial relations with some AIC leadership and actively participated in some of their huge religious festivals which were televised. In that way, an attempt was made to bring popular religion within the ideological network of the state as well as link it with the governments' social programmes which are unpopular among the black masses. The state is giving financial encouragement to the formation and facilitation of black gospel musical groups with the aim of co-opting black religious music for use against black people's historical project of liberation.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The above exposition on popular religion leads us to several conclusions, some of which are the following.

4.1. Popular religion is a very significant phenomenon which cannot be wished away nor ignored by those who are committed to the course of justice for the oppressed and the poor.

4.2. The oppressed will not be left alone to develop their own religion and forms of worship.

4.3. Popular religion as a growing force in the ongoing ideological contest, will never be free from attempts to co-opt it for use as an ideological weapon by the powerful in society.

4.4. That Steve Biko was right when he said that the most potent weapon in the hand of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. It is therefore imperative for the mass organizations of the oppressed to develop ways of actively defending and protecting popular religion against co-optation and manipulation by the enemies of the oppressed.. They should regard popular religion as a liberative resource that can be harnessed to facilitate the process of liberation as well as a terrain of struggle for control of ideological resources of the oppressed.

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