

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

---

## **Folk Catholicism: Its Significance, Value and Ambiguities**

Antoine Vergote

*Philippine Studies* vol. 30, no. 1 (1982) 5–26

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

**Folk Catholicism:  
Its Significance, Value and Ambiguities**  
ANTOINE VERGOTE

From various perspectives, folk catholicism is an object of interest, of discussion, or of controversy. Rationalistically-minded people consider it with a mixture of amusement and disdain, as an odd, superstitious, and primitive if not infantile subject. But anthropologists are interested in it as they are in every cultural and religious phenomenon. Within Christianity, it is a phenomenon that is often considered critically from the points of view of theology, of spirituality, or of ethical and socio-political involvement. Nonetheless, the disappearance of many if not of all its manifestations in many European areas, leads many people to a sympathetic although critical evaluation.

My view of it will be pastoral, that is, I will try to understand it in the light of psychology and anthropology, and to evaluate it in reference to the nature of a religious person and of Christian faith.

**GENERAL CHARACTERIZATION OF FOLK CATHOLICISM**

Folk catholicism is the Catholic form of folk religion. This means that in folk catholicism, general elements of folk religion penetrate within the Christian belief. From scientific discussions it seems that the meaning of the term folk catholicism is very uncertain, due to the many definitions given to the word "folk." We may clarify somewhat the complex whole that constitutes folk catholicism if we consider the two core meanings of the word "folk." On the one hand it signifies the entirety of people who live in a community, speak the same language, usually live in a delineated territory, and share a number of cultural habits and institutions. On the other hand, the word "folk" has a sociological meaning signifying the group of people that is used in contrast to

the cultural and/or economically dominant group. The term "folk catholicism" is thus broader than the French term "*religion populaire*" ("popular religion"), which has a more sociological signification. In the present article folk catholicism will include the combined meaning of both definitions of "folk": it is the catholicism that is tightly bound to the cultural traditions of the people and that is adhered to by the majority of the people, thus giving it the distinguishing character of so-called popular religion.

Because folk catholicism is situated within the totality of the universal church community, it receives a special meaning which folk religions in non-universal religions lack. Within the church community the term has its own significance due to the distinctions that must be made within a coherent whole. Folk catholicism thus must be distinguished:

- Firstly, from the strict mystical traditions. In their critique of folk piety, the mystics appear almost as iconoclasts. In this, mystics are close to the charismatic movements.

- Secondly, folk catholicism should be distinguished from theology. Theology has, as one of its duties, the important function of evolving the inner logic, the conceptual and linguistic structure of the belief content, and so of bridging belief and intellectual culture. Thus theology fulfills an intellectual function in the service of faith. As with the mystics, theology is often critical toward folk religion. It attempts to purify Christianity of the inherited and still living superstitions that are adhered to in folk religion. Indirectly, however, it supports folk catholicism because in a community of believers that is losing its intellectuals, folk catholicism can, but with some difficulty, maintain itself. One realizes clearly the distinction between theologically-formed catholicism and folk catholicism, as well as the difficulty of bringing them together, whenever one reads a particularly theological Pauline text in a village church. It is easy to moralize in a sermon, but most difficult to convey the rich theological faith-content of the Pauline texts to folk believers.

- Thirdly, folk catholicism is distinguished, and this especially in recent times, from what some have termed the "church of the believers." By this term, one means the group of strong personally engaged believers for whom faith is the practical result of a personal conversion. Some people think that in the future, Christian belief will for the most part be limited to the "church of the believers."

In the opposition between folk catholicism and "the church of the believers," we can distinguish two groups who make different critiques of folk catholicism.

Firstly, some insist on the specific nature of belief as opposed to religion. This opposition has a strict theological basis. Belief is a personal engagement with God as He manifests Himself personally in the words, acts, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The word belief, with the meaning of a personal relationship of acknowledgement and confidence, is characteristic of the New Testament. As such, belief is absent in other religions. The Calvinist theologian Karl Barth says that "religion," as opposed to belief, is the work of man, human imagination, and therefore ultimately idolatry, because it is not the recognition of the true God. This idea has also been repeated by some Catholic authors. True belief is a voluntary conversion. There has evolved, however, a tendency to interpret positively the so-called pagan or idolatrous religions; a new ecumenism appreciates the worth of every culture and every religion. In this new context, folk catholicism is no longer opposed to belief.

The opposition between folk catholicism and the "church of the believers" has, however, been renewed by some groups of conversion-movements, specifically some charismatic groups. They tend to emphasize authentic belief-experiences: the experience, e.g., of the risen Christ as he is actively in his Church and in the faithful believer. I appreciate the charismatic movement, even if I am not a member of it, but I would not consider them as an elite, or as the only authentic believers. The members of charismatic groups generally do not belong to the lower social class, but to the middle or higher class. This brings with it two consequences:

(1) An opposition between cultural types and consequently between different forms of religion and Christian belief. To more educated people, some forms of folk catholicism seem to be too affectively loaded, too imaginative, too realistic, if not superstitious or infantile. More educated people often share this rational disdain for folk religion.

(2) A second consequence can be that since middle-class people are socially conservative, charismatic groups are sometimes (not always!) less preoccupied with the liberation of peoples, less socially involved in social movements. There is also often a more personal and specific religious reason for this:

they have discovered for themselves the newness of God's presence and are centered on this experience — as people who are going through a love-experience — and thus are less attentive to the social-ethical consequences of this belief. This leads me to the second group which often opposes folk religion.

Secondly, some Basic Christian Communities distrust folk catholicism. Their approach derives from the liberation theology in Latin America. Some draw much inspiration from Marxism — they take over Marxist schemes of analysis in order to foster a Christianity that engages itself socially and politically. Since they are most attentive to the social-ethical consequences of their belief, they fear that both folk religion and the charismatic movement turn away from the necessary task of social change. They are even inclined to consider folk religion as an “opium of the people” (in the Marxist sense of the expression), and the charismatic movement as “opium *for* the people” (which is a neo-Marxist judgment).

Folk religion is thus a complex phenomenon, for it can be considered and evaluated from different perspectives. I will not deny the danger of folk catholicism, but I will try to show its value and dignity.

If we proceed from the belief that Jesus' message is directed to everyone, then it is clear that in a faith community unavoidably different forms of faith-practices must exist. Thus folk catholicism, mysticism, the church of believers, and theological faith-purification and deepening represent faith-forms which address themselves to the cultural situation, or more personally to an individual's life-history. Tensions among these belief-forms are unavoidable, even inevitable. In the church, as in the Father's house, there must really be many rooms. This, in any case, is my view whenever I, as a believer, consider how much people differ from one another in terms of direction, milieu, formation, and social function. I shall try to justify this fundamental attitude of openness by an accurate and, as far as is possible, a non-prejudiced exploration of folk catholicism. I shall then describe the characteristics that I consider as essential, and I shall endeavor to judge them from a pastoral point of view. This means that I shall indicate those characteristics that I feel promote true faith, and those that hinder it.

## FOLK RELIGION IS HABIT RELIGION

This feature characterizes folk religion in contrast to the so-called "church of the believers." In milieus that consider themselves progressive, "habit religion" — in these days — is a scornful expression. Some educated people who are but half-enlightened in the area of anthropology and religion turn disdainfully away from this faith-life because, they say, for the majority it is "only a habit." A lingering ideology of our time is partly responsible for the pejorative meaning that "habit" has received, especially as regards religion. Through mass media — often fanatically trumpeted (at least in Europe) — comes the idea that habits are not authentic, not personal, and that one is himself only when he lays aside old garbs and strives for renewal. I do not deny that every generation must bring renewal; otherwise, life stands still and dies out. Nevertheless, I am convinced that without rooting itself in the past, the urge to renewal is but a self-deceptive ideology and shortlived. In every community and in every person lives the tension between renewal and continuity. It is characteristic of folk catholicism that within its configuration, habits are a stronger feature than the spirit of renewal.

I thus take habit religion in a positive sense, all the while recognizing the concomitant danger of religious practices becoming fossilized and impersonal. In my judgment of "habit religion," I maintain the view of cultural anthropology which, contrary to the already mentioned ideological trend, gives a rich meaning to "habit." I will develop this idea further, as it offers substantial ground for a psychological and pastoral evaluation of habit religion.

## THE VALUE OF HABIT RELIGION

*Customs.* Customs ("coutumes") are fixed life-forms, patterns of behavior, and representations that belong to a community. Considered as customs is a variety of things, such as a handshake, an embrace, the different clothing of men and women, of children, adolescents, and adults, the rotation of work and vacation, the language people speak. The individual assumes these existing life-forms, and finds in them his own identity as member of a community. Every kind of community has, as such, its customs: the

family, the working community, the friendship circle, marriage partners, the nation. In folk catholicism, one can indicate various customs: the Christmas midnight Mass, decorating graves on the eve of all Souls' Day; pilgrimages (still existing in many countries), or again, the May devotions in a Marian chapel. One sees clearly that these concern actions that are incidental to the faith-content and that stand next to the sacramental practice. They do not actually emerge from Christian belief, but rather they become incorporated in it. In contrast to the specific faith-life, they are, strictly speaking, only fringe phenomena, although they are, nevertheless forms in which the believing people find and express themselves.

As customs, they are ritual actions in the anthropological (not theological) sense of the word: established symbolic behavior, transmitted in folk culture from generation to generation and so profoundly ingrained in the sensibilities, that they, like language, belong to the identity of the person. Folk religion consists thus of religious behavior that, through historical inheritance, belongs to the cultural identity of a folk community. Its importance is that it creates a unity between folk culture and the Christian faith. This can most clearly be seen in former mission territories. There, the community is presently engaged in an effort to incorporate its own indigenous customs in a faith-life which had previously estranged the community from itself. For, together with the new belief, foreign culture-forms had been imposed on it, and its own customs had been excluded from its new faith or had remained exterior to it.

In countries of Europe, where Christian belief was introduced centuries ago, most forms of folk catholicism are christianized old pagan symbolic expressions and symbols. Think of the many pilgrimages to Marian cult-places, like Chartres, Montserrat, or Chestokova. There, the venerated statue or icon of the virgin is that of a black virgin. Now, every Christian knows that Mary was Jewish and therefore not black. But it is interesting to note that there was previously a pagan veneration of a black earth goddess, which the virgin subsequently replaced, maintaining, however, the old powerfully attractive representation. Consciously, the present-day Christian pilgrims no longer perceive the symbolic meaning of the black figure, which was the figuration of an earthly (therefore black), more or less divine power. I do not know how much the

symbolic meaning of the black figure still appeals to their subconscious perception; as far as I know, no research has been done on this topic. Perhaps, a symbolic difference between black and white still evokes the difference between an ordinary woman of white people and the virgin.

In that case, one can understand that in other countries, the difference takes on the inverse symbolic form: some dark people — as I observed to be the case in Indonesia — prefer a white virgin figure, because, they said, she is not just an ordinary woman. Symbolism always requires a minimum of form difference. Whatever the present symbolic perception of the pilgrims to Montserrat, Chestokova, or Chartres, what I would stress is that a christian ritual belief-expression evolved within a powerful, ancient, traditional symbolic form, and that, in this way, it became an important element of folk catholicism. Christian people, including the educated, can and do live their christian identity in their own cultural and symbolic forms. This illustrates the meaning of habits or customs: that they are symbolic forms through which one expresses oneself with one's own cultural language. Customs — religious customs included — are a second nature, a cultural nature. They form a second spontaneity in emotion, expression, and devotion.

*Festive Character.* Folk religious expressions often have a festive character. Consider the Christmas night celebration, May devotions, pilgrimages, the "pardonings" in Brittany in France, the feast of Our Lady of Montserrat in Barcelona, the fiestas in the Philippines. Festivity is the disinterested and grateful expression of the joy of feeling oneself incorporated into a community, and sharing in the good that enriches every member. Festivity regenerates the person and makes the routine and burden of daily life more meaningful. In the feast, the community celebrates the happenings which saved, established, or renewed it; or else, it celebrates the person who, because of his exceptional contribution, is a father- or mother-figure for the community. Festivity demands certain concrete symbolic forms in which one recognizes oneself as belonging to this community. Folk religion gives precisely these symbolic forms. So it came about that in the orthodox church, Easter became the pre-eminent religious feast, whereas in the West, Christmas — rather than the resurrection feast — is lived to the



fullest. Without folk symbolic signs and usages, the faith-content does not really penetrate the heart and the mentality of the people.

*Symbolic Aspect.* In the symbolic customs, individual and community find a link to their past and situate themselves in a history of successive generations. This awareness gives the participants in the tradition a sureness of identity. One recognizes and confirms himself in his own dignity by attaching himself to the life and religious forms that have given men a human nobility springing from tradition. It is, above all, the family that transmits customs. Wherever a good home environment exists, one remains proudly attached to the customs with which one grew up. These customs provide the models with which the developing person can identify in order to become himself. Customs, in the positive sense, give one a feeling of being protected and secure; if they did not, in the chaotic contrasts of the world one would not know how to create a meaningful order. The dignity that untarnished forms of religious folk customs can give to a simple people is remarkable. The Polish folk religion, recently spot-lighted by the Pope's visit, is a striking witness to this.

*Moral Dimension.* In the customs, as I have described them, moral considerations usually also have an important place. Everyone has experienced how folk catholicism has nurtured and supported in many communities a tradition of human and christian attitudes that has elevated the people's morals. In Burma, I was impressed by the influence of the Buddhist tradition. And one knows how difficult it is for a community to change a tradition for its own good. Indifference, lack of helpfulness, coldness in work-associations, corruption, revenge, racism, are also transmitted and ingrained as customs, as are the Christian or Buddhist customs of hospitality and love for one another.

For all these reasons, one must be careful in one's judgment, for example, whenever people say that they attend Sunday Mass, that they give their children a Christian education, or that they marry in the Church, because they have always been used to-it-being-done that way. This does not mean that these religious forms have no personal meaning for them. One must distinguish between those who say that they do it because "it is simply the custom," and those who refer to what really is inherent in their own customs. In the latter case, it means that they always saw it-being-done-so, and learned it so, and that they are attached to it because

they agree with this way of life and find it worthwhile. This can just as well be the case with university graduates, as with folk people. I have had experience with graduates who very rarely attend Sunday Mass, and yet asked me to officiate at their marriages. To my astonished question as to why they wished to marry within the Church, they replied: "We were brought up that way." Speaking with them further, it was clearly evident that, while they did not consider themselves very christian, nevertheless fundamentally they believed, because they had experienced that their upbringing was a meaningful life-conviction. They were attached to it and they wanted to be Christian also by remaining faithful to the evangelical demands of honesty and charity.

Habit religion has more content than most of its critics think. Habit has, above all, a meaning analogous to reliance on a model. Whenever people believe because they are stirred up and convinced by the example of a believer, no one can deny that such an aroused faith can be real. An example, a model, is a living sign through which the truth of the faith is mediated. Customs are equally good faith-patterns on which one can lean, because they are the witnesses to a worthwhile lifestyle. Moreover, one absorbs them into one's being and their rich influence penetrates deeper than one is often aware. Religious customs are like the language that one learns to speak together with the affective refinement of manners in which one unconsciously grew up: they have become one with our personhood.

Folk religion is a symbolic mansion in which a person feels at home, where he becomes more fully himself, to which he attaches himself because he can remain himself there and can spontaneously express in its forms his own deeper convictions and feelings. If we consider the deep anthropological significance of habit religion, then we can understand why it holds out for so long a time, and why many communities defend it so obstinately when it is menaced. We can appreciate then what a profound disturbance of belief the dismantling of religious customs brings about.

#### THE LIMITATION AND FRAGILITY OF HABIT-RELIGION

In Europe, the current interest in folk catholicism is actually stimulated by the disappearance of a large part of folk religion customs in many European countries. Processions are rarely a fes-

tive celebration by a community of its Protector-saint or of its venerated reliquary. The Cross-days, which formerly were such impressive religious experiences, are now often regarded as bygone folklore or superstition. The priest begins to realize that a void exists. He questions the worth of previous folk catholicism. Remarking that the loss goes hand in hand with the regression in religious practices and with the loss of Christian morality, he lends a ready ear to the sociological prophets who expect the future of belief to reside in a small believers' church, the "remnant" on which the biblical prophets relied during the exile. Others are more concerned with the large majority; they can rely for support on sociology and cultural anthropology because, in reaction to earlier scientific disdain for folk religion and for folk culture in general, a good many studies are now centering on their formative influence.

As I see it, one must first accurately describe "habit or folk religion." Only then can one pose the pastoral-theological question as to whether the one or the other better fulfills the prerequisites of Christian faith. We see that in the milieu and the conditions of the times, faith sometimes assumes the profile of a "believers' church," and at other times that of "habit church." I personally do not see any reason to accept that a "believers' church" is more real than that of a habit church. It is true that there is a practical certainty that someone who engages himself in faith out of personal choice and in opposition to the unbelief of his milieu, starts off with conviction. Folk catholicism, on the contrary, shelters believers marked by a whole gamut of convictions; but included among them are people who personally pattern their lives on the gospel in a marvelous way. As a witness of that, I can add a personal experience. Seldom have I heard God and the evangelical way of life so purely spoken of than when I was packed into a mud-floored, sultry living room full of illiterate, desperately poor people somewhere in the northeast of Brazil. Belonging to the typical Brazilian folk catholicism, with its pilgrimages, its saint-veneration, and all that signifies exotic "folklore" for many educated people, they could speak about the Sermon on the Mount as I have but rarely heard it preached.

Nevertheless, folk catholicism is clearly fragile. In my country, whenever people from the remote countryside of rural tradition went to Brussels to work and to live, they buried a large part of

their religious practices. The same happens with many students who, through their university studies, make the transition to another kind of community. This does not imply that the previous belief was not real, but that it was not prepared for the test. It is impossible to prepare someone completely for the faith-test. One can never digest through theoretical explanations beforehand, a new reality in which one will later find himself. Therefore, it was a wise move to establish national parishes in the United States, to welcome the immigrants into a community where they could find their life and religious customs, and so facilitate their transition to a new milieu. The disappearance of a large part of folk religion in my country forces one to pose the question as to whether or not it still has a future, or even whether or not it is worth the trouble to prolong that which still exists. Are the folk religions in our midst finished, and does the future of belief lie, indeed, with the "believers' church"? Agreed that we pronounce no value judgments on either, then the question arises whether or not existing facts actually indicate that we, unavoidably forced through actual circumstances, are moving towards a believers' church, and that it is thus wasted effort to try to preserve folk catholicism. I am personally skeptical as regards sociological predictions. Prophets of this genre were more than once disappointed by an unforeseen turn of events. Let us, then, briefly review the causes of the changes and see if we can learn something for the future from them.

#### IMPACT OF OPEN SOCIETY

Everyone knows that many customs of folk catholicism have fallen by the wayside because of changes in living conditions. Television, movies and travel have brought people into contact with so many different ways of thinking and doing that they come to realize the relativity of their own customs. It is an established principle in cultural anthropology that a closed society experiences its own customs, mores, and symbols as absolutes. Through contact with others, these diminish in value; and this, above all, when the other has the prestige of prosperity, development, and freedom. Also, tourism often destroys folk religion. It makes of it a spectacle for strangers. A stranger with a poor culture and without respect for the humanity of foreign traditions, looks at mani-

festations of folk-culture as odd, if not childish and superstitious. The people who are looked at in that way, easily internalize the look directed at them by others. They then see themselves "through the eyes of the strangers," and their customs become stripped of their essence. They perceive the commercial gains of rituals-turned-exhibitions, but they lose sight of the interior meaning, the lived content of these practices. In this way, tourism becomes a commercial perversion of folk religion, making it amusing folklore. Whereas Christ said, "Go and instruct all people," tourists, on the other hand, go and photograph all people and in so doing reduce them to more pageantry on display. The example of the southern Spanish celebration of Holy Week illustrates this. Formerly, the Holy Week processions were really an invasion of the streets by the sacred. People participated profoundly in the drama of Christ and the Virgin. Now, tens of thousands of tourists overflow these cities and villages, and the celebration has slowly lost its authentic religious significance. When I was in Banaue, and some people performed for the tourists their old dances as well as their old sacred rites — I felt this as a sacrilegious performance.

As has already been mentioned, in some epochs an ideology of change exercised a strong influence, and this happened just at the moment that folk catholicism was crumbling due to greater prosperity and new contacts with other living habits. Often the present generation possesses a spirit of rebellion, seeking itself through the rejection of the past. In other times and other cultures, the accent lay elsewhere: one's own identity is stressed by embracing the continuity of the tradition in which one was rooted. It is a known fact that the Japanese culture made real efforts to modernize, all the while holding on to its own style and ritual customs with pride and awareness. In its fierce resistance to a dominating force, the Polish community also preserved its own folk identity through all the technological and social changes. This shows that there can be choice in holding fast to a valued folk religion.

In my own country, there are signs that the mentality in our community is changing. A renewed interest in smaller villages, the move to preserve and restore the landscape as well as old city neighborhoods, and many local initiatives with a festive, community and religious character, point to a new appreciation of folk culture. Will a new folk catholicism develop from this movement? Possibly. Much depends on the discretion of pastoral work. It is

certain that folk catholicism cannot be forced and that ample time is needed for it to evolve. It appears certain to me that a future folk catholicism will have to be free from faith propositions that cannot resist the critique of present-day culture. As I shall discuss in the fourth point, folk catholicism has few characteristics that are now generally viewed skeptically by a scientific mentality and an interior faith-critique.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN MEDIATORS BETWEEN GOD AND MAN

We can sharply formulate this characteristic as follows: one believes in God and in Jesus Christ, but one is attached to Mary, to St. Anthony of Padua, or to another saint, be he canonized by the church or by the people. In this attachment to human mediators, I recognize three elements.

One is looking for a link with a person who belongs to the divine world but who is nearer and more familiar than God himself. God remains the mysterious unpredictable reality. Even Jesus Christ appears a bit too divine for men to experience a warm and personal relation with him. Mary (or another saint) is closer to the people, and yet she has a divine power and reality. Saints emerge from the human and they remain trusted persons with whom one can more personally relate.

The link with these half-divine figures is also personal because of their special allegedly historical intervention or because they arose from a special devotion. Take for instance Our Lady of Lourdes, of Oostakker, of Dadizele, of Bannaux, of Chartres, of Chestokova, of Fatima, of Guadalupe or of Antipolo: for the community she is somehow "my" Our Lady. It is unthinkable to say "Jesus of Flanders," or "Jesus of Chartres," but one prays to and sings the hymn, "Our Lady of Flanders," or "Our Lady of Chartres," just as one sings and prays to Our Lady of Lourdes or of Guadalupe. There is the special Christian expression "my God." A Roman or a Greek would never have prayed so. Through Jesus Christ there exists a special link between the believer and his God, a link which is rather universal and not elective. But to realize the exceptional range of the expression, "my God," one has to traverse a path of faith-deepening that is a sort of conversion-discovery. The well-known conversion memorial of Pascal ex-

presses this conversion in burning words; looking very personally at Christ a long time, Pascal received from Him this message, "Fire, fire, fire. My God, who will be your God also." Folk catholicism places the personal link first with a mediator with whom, by a special initiative, a historical bond has grown.

One also looks for protection, help, and comfort from a mediator whom one does not fear to approach. God remains always the "tremendum." Yet Saint Paul emphasized that we, moved by the Spirit of God, can now go to God without fear and can address him with confidence: "Father" (Rom. 8:1-8). That trust is actually not easy, for God remains the one who fathoms man's heart and marrow, and like a sword He divides the good from the evil. Trust and diffidence, hope and awareness of sinfulness remain the two poles in the God-relationship. Jesus Christ is even the Judge who will judge with divine power. In order to approach him as a "friend" or a "brother," one would have to put him on the same footing as a folk saint, and this too familiar relation would dissipate belief in His divine greatness. In the people's connection with an accessible mediator, a demand to live Christianly is also recognized. But one does not have to fear the mediator. He/she is human and understanding, and he/she will intercede with God. Recall the medieval legend of the priest who lived with a woman, but who never neglected to say his Saturday Mass in honor of Mary; at his death, his sins were forgiven through her intercession. Through the fact that a celebrated saint chose this or that place to intervene, he/she is "at home" there is a special way, and one can go to him/her in pilgrimage, can leave daily life and enter the vicinity of the higher divine reality. This makes pilgrimages festive events. It would be anthropological nonsense to remove festivity from pilgrimages.

In catholicism, the Pope is the visible mediator with whom one can come in contact by seeing him, by hearing him, by receiving his blessing, even by touching him, or in picking up a flower strewn for him and upon which he has stepped. Why not? Intellectuals who sometimes look down their noses at this, go themselves to visit the museum/birthplace of a favorite author or an admired scholar. This desire for trustworthy closeness is not necessarily seen as a superstition that a miraculous power emanates from this holy place or object, though it can be, and in fact, often has been the case.

## MEDIATORS AND SECTS

The longing for human mediators is, in part, responsible for the existence of sects. God seems far away. But, in certain "charismatic" figures one tries to hear his voice and to experience his powerful presence. In earlier christianity and, sometimes again in African or Brazilian catholicism, visionaries rose up who were convinced that they were chosen messengers from God; the folk-faiths venerated them as the expression of the human proximity of God. The church has always had a skeptical attitude towards this human phenomenon. The causes of sect-formation may be numerous. Special human problems, as the enigma of evil, or the question of physical illness, can lend motive to particular sect-formations, as evidenced by Bryan Wilson. But at the origin of many sects, there are also factors which are intimately connected with our topic. People who feel as though they were aliens in the official church, who do not understand its languages, who fear being alienated in a foreign culture, sometimes separate themselves from the Christian church and form a community which saves them from religious and cultural anonymity. In the sect, at least, they find the opportunity of belonging to a home-like society. It provides them with the setting where they can find a means of cultural, national, and religious identification. Often, these sects have a millenarian doctrine. From a charismatic leader, they expect social, national, and cultural liberation. In that way, their doctrine justifies ideologically their separation from the church, which they reject as belonging to the alienating and decadent world. It is not my intention to give a comprehensive explanation of the sect phenomena. I simply wish to underscore the idea that folk catholicism can offer religious forms of emotional, more spontaneous cults that are in accord with their own sensitivity and ancestral memories. In the absence of a living folk catholicism, people may search for this on the outskirts of christianity, in sects.

Admittedly, the present-day widespread veneration of the Pope answers the desire for a visible mediator. This veneration sometimes annoys the Protestants and causes them to fear that catholicism will fall back into a papalatrophy that they themselves have overcome. I do not think that the popular veneration of the Pope implies that danger of papalatrophy; the real danger would be that theologians exaggerate the significance and function of the pope,



and declare him to be head of the church, whereas it is Christ who is the head of the Church.

Whenever a pilgrimage is a fundamental symbolic human action, such as I have described it, one clearly sees that this is not specifically folk catholicism in the sense of catholicism of the uneducated. Thousands of students make the annual pilgrimage from Paris to Chartres. As is already clear from the discussion concerning habit-religion, the border between folk catholicism and catholicism fluctuates. Still, there is this one clear difference: folk people usually believe more strongly in the appearance of a miraculous intervention, precisely because they desire much more this concrete bodily divine proximity, whereas more developed people are more skeptical or unbelieving in this respect — and they have reasons to be so. Priests who, with reason, are skeptical about the appearances of the Virgin in many places — in Bannaux, or to the so-called Holy Blood of Brugge, for example, often feel themselves confronted with a troublesome dilemma: they do not want to go against the desire and the convictions of their faithful, but they also do not wish to commit themselves to that which they consider to be an illusion or a superstition. I think that one can calmly regard such veneration as merely sacred symbolic representations.

#### NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF FOLK CATHOLICISM

I will not discuss the folkloric forms of superstition, such as the “belief” that eggs laid on Good Friday will not spoil until the following year; or the “belief” that 13 is an unlucky number — (the latter, as well as many other superstitions, is not limited to folk catholicism; many large hotels avoid assigning 13 to a floor, and so jump from 12 to 14!) These are all marginal phenomena that are not as such typical of folk catholicism.

More importantly, and certainly more problematic for true faith, is: first, the need of intercessory religiosity that often dominates folk catholicism; second, the question of whether or not folk catholicism includes the danger of what, in Marxist terms, one calls religious illusion.

Let us again consider the claim for human mediators. There are two elements to be distinguished here. Well known examples may introduce the question. The gypsies (still nomadic European people) go on pilgrimage to Saintes Maries-des-Mer, on the south-

ern coast of France, where St. Magdalena, whom they venerate in a special way, is supposed to have disembarked after Jesus' death; they go there in order to ask for health for their children and their animals, and so that their affairs will prosper. Portuguese fishermen plunge their statues of St. Anthony in the water to assure abundant catches. Older members of congregations in my country still remember the little chapels where one went to venerate a certain saint in order to obtain a cure for a special sickness. From the Cross-days, one expected a fruitful harvest. And eggs offered to St. Clare would assure sunshine for a feast, while farmers prayed on the same days for rain! . . . That is also folk catholicism. In my country, it has almost disappeared. Nevertheless, repeated research has determined that the socio-economic population which is the least developed, prays very often to God for help in material and bodily needs. I will not go into the question as to whether or not God in this sense is really Providence. What is important here is that with the same population, rebelliousness towards God is just as strongly present, and sometimes this develops into unbelief. Whenever the emphasis in the faith-life lies in intercessory need-religiosity, then one becomes disappointed with God. Above all, one does not come close to the faith of the "Good News" that Jesus proclaimed in the beatitudes: "Blessed are you, also in your personal difficulties, because God comes to you."

The characteristic of folk catholicism here discussed is probably one of the main reasons why so many folk forms of the Christian faith have lost their meaning and disappeared. The increased general development of our community has unveiled the deceptive nature of these motives. The man, Anseele, who set up the socialistic syndicate in Gent, Belgium, went to wait for the workers who had gone to a Marian chapel in the month of May to pray, and easily convinced them that a militant social solidarity would more quickly put a beefsteak in their stomachs than Our Lady would. Political strength, technology, and medicine have, in a short time, replaced the futile pilgrimages for bread and cures.

#### FORMS OF MAGIC?

The question can be asked whether or not these traits of folk catholicism are forms of magic, and are thus opposed to authentic belief. The answer to this question is not an easy one, for magic is

a complex affair and the notion is a very confused one. The question of magic is much more present in a context of syncretism between animism and christian religion. Animism is an inadequate term for belief in spirits. In this form of animism, God is the creator, the supreme supernatural being, but after His initial act of creation, He rests and does not involve Himself personally with men and their world. He is the *Deus Otiosus*, the idle God, who leaves the world at the disposal of all kinds of spirits (spirits of nature: forests, water, mountains, of the rice, spirits of ancestors, of a deceased person). Originally, that kind of religion was – and, here and there, is still – very widely spread and profoundly embedded in the deep levels of man's consciousness and of the cultural belief system. Therefore, and also because psychologically it is so natural, it resists strongly the critical considerations as well as the Christian message.

One observes everywhere – even in our christian Middle Ages – that christianized people make a kind of syncretistic transition from the spirits to the saints. So, for instance, people who were accustomed to pray to spirits of the four directions (east, west, south, north), when converted to catholicism, would give to these directions the names of the four evangelists. The number 4 is the word-bridge that links the old religious practices with the new belief. In what measure is this a christianization of "pagan" religion? There is no simple answer, because there is a transition and a continuum between both. The placing of christian names on old practices can be a mere superficial change of names, in which the saints function just as the former spirits. When social and political powers impose the new belief, the syncretistic adoption of new names for old functions and symbols is a good mask behind which people protect their own religion against repression.

On the other hand, the new names may bring with them some new content, a truly Christian message. Surely such a transition was going on when, in the Middle Ages, the black earthly goddesses were replaced by the Virgin, the black Virgin. I think that most old belief systems can only be gradually transformed. Therefore, I think that saints, as human mediators, have an important function in the transition from animism to christian belief, even when the saints function as human protectors and providers for all kinds of very human needs. A higher level of education can then collaborate with an ongoing christian formation in order to

purify the beliefs of their superstitious behavior. For I would call this behavior more superstition than magic. Magic has a strict signification: magic spells are outside religion; they are even opposed to religion, as the studies of M. Mouss have shown.

However, from my previous description of folk catholicism it appears that the folk forms of religion are not intrinsically determined by petitionary motives. In actuality, the two are so strongly interwoven with one another that they often disappear simultaneously. Often, priests have not had sufficient insight into this development to be able to guide the community through a transition to purer faith motives. I wonder, for example, if the Cross-days could not have remained a very beautiful form of folk catholicism, if one had animated them with a festive and grateful creation-belief, as the Psalm sings, "Question the earth, says God, and it will answer with grain and wine." Would not this rite also give a stronger symbolic meaning to the Mass celebrant? And the theologically much-talked about "religious experience" would also have had a practical content there.

#### IDEALIZATION OF PERSONS

A second, rather shadowy characteristic of folk catholicism, is the inclination to idealize and sacralize persons. This is connected with the tendency to look for mediators who will bring divine power closer. To idealize means to attribute exceptional qualities to persons so that, while admittedly human, they somehow seem exempt from human difficulties. This religious idealization is also a sacralization; it ascribes to persons miraculous knowledge of deeds and clothes them with angelic gifts. See the thriving saints' legends of former times that literally filled volumes! Even the sisters of Liseux did their best to retouch Theresa's photos to make her appear more angelic! The fact that until not so long ago, the pope never appeared at table with a companion, shows how close this veneration is to idealization. The Pope could not be seen to have the same needs and pleasures as other men — a strange phenomenon when one considers how often the gospels record that Jesus sat at table with others. The priest also becomes easily idealized. The religious garb often had the function of sacralization of his person rather than being simply a sign of recognition. I am also convinced that this tendency is partly responsible for the

former overstressing of Jesus' divinity with the lack of appreciation for his humanity.

This idealizing is not harmless for faith. It places religiousness on a par with the miraculous and distracts attention from true faith-development. It also introduces a division between the actual concrete existing man and his faith. Through idealization the saints lose, for example, their meaning as models for a realistic faith development. Anthony of Padua is so miraculous for his Italian venerated, that he is removed from the human condition and one is no longer interested in his real life. One could analyze, in this respect, devotion to the Infant Jesus, the Santo Niño. St. Augustine, in contrast, does not attract popular piety: he was too human in his sanctity. Anthony is venerated but is not to be imitated. Augustine can be a model for a faith that searches and gradually comes to truth; but it is also for this reason that idealizing folk catholicism passes him by.

To complete our discussion let us now consider the critique some who hold with liberation theology make of folk catholicism. They call attention to a third problem. They fear folk catholicism will maintain people in a state of socio-political repression and in the religious-cultural control of a powerful minority. Even without assenting to the orthodox marxist philosophy that considers all religion as an alienation, they apply the scheme to folk catholicism. There is, of course, the danger that folk catholicism draws the attention, interest, and the energy of people to the enjoyment of festive celebrations. A folk feast can be an opium by means of which one forgets the painful reality which he encounters in daily living. Moreover, the superstitious elements and their idealization bring people to expect from their saints or from God that which society as a whole should realize in responsible human enterprises: better health, more humane work conditions, more justice, more welfare. If religion does not promote such initiatives, it is a soporific illusion. Therefore, liberation theology is right in accentuating what they call the ethical social conscientization of people.

However, I do not agree with a one dimensional unbalanced liberation theology, for two reasons. First, it is not true that folk catholicism necessarily conveys this lack of social consciousness. On the contrary, in different countries like Brazil, Nicaragua, Salvador, and, as we have observed recently, in Poland, folk catholicism became a dynamic force in the social and political conscienti-

zation of the people. Their leaders, clergy and folkpeople, mobilized their community to defend and to restore their own cultural, national and religious tradition against the oppressive powers that alienate them. In the northeast of Brazil, I have seen that the cult of their local (not officially canonized) saint and the pilgrimages to his tomb provided the situation and the models for the formation of active groups and stimulated a confident dynamism for revolutionary initiatives. I would even say that Christian belief alone is rarely a sufficient motivation for involvement in liberation movements. It has to be sustained by the striving to preserve and to enhance one's own national and cultural identity. Folk religion precisely brings together these elements. Think also of what happened in Iran, despite the excesses of the islamic revolution brought about by a fanatic clergy.

Secondly, I ask if festivity is necessarily an opium. It can be, and it can be exploited as such by the oppressive power. We know that already in ancient Rome the political authority gave the people *panem et circenses*, bread and plays, in order to calm and to numb them. But is festivity not an essential element in human existence? At some moments, men celebrate figures, especially divine figures and events that transcend him. We should be careful not to repeat in our critique the obsessive task-oriented mentality that restricts the christian belief to ethical obligations, to useful work, and to narrow rationality. Nothing is more de-humanizing. In festive celebrations, people experience that life is worth living, just as they experience it in the enjoyment of friendship, of child-birth, and of human love. There is more to man than the need for bread and for health. To reduce man to the dimension of work, utility, and ethical responsibility, is to repress other human dimensions. It would be another form of alienation.

## CONCLUSION

I have distinguished the deeply human and the all too human in folk catholicism. Even in the face of the negative evaluation of certain characteristics, I, as a psychologist, remain sympathetic. A pastoral attitude does not limit itself to a psychological, sociological, or cultural-anthropological analysis. It is both understanding and critical. In the light of faith and with human insight, it must be attentive to the lasting and general human truths of folk

catholicism, as well as critical toward the illusory longings and motivations in it. Apart from the liturgy, a folk community often seeks to experience its religion in forms more spontaneous to it. These forms, precisely because they belong to folk culture, are also the familiar customs of home. Without forms of folk catholicism, the community would be alienated from the Church and the human shelter of folk culture would be desecrated. In our society, folk catholicism will only remain alive or possibly blossom again, depending on whether or not a symbolic content that is freed from all human tendencies is restored.