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The Illusion of Neutrality: Reflections on the Term “Popular Religion”

Using the insights of the sociology of knowledge, the author attempts to elucidate some of the central biases which he argues have prevented US sociologists of religion from grasping the power dynamics behind the use of the concept of popular religion. He ends with some theoretical and historical observations about this concept that are intended to overcome the central shortcomings of its use in the US context.

L'auteur, se basant sur les acquis de la sociologie de la connaissance, tente d'élucider certains partis pris fondamentaux qui ont, selon lui, empêché les sociologues de la religion aux Etats-Unis de saisir toute la force du concept de "religion populaire" et de son utilisation. Il termine en livrant quelques observations théoriques et historiques relatives à ce concept, dans le but de remédier à son utilisation largement insuffisante dans le contexte américain.

I will begin with some brief comments about the sociology of knowledge (I). I will then, with this branch of sociology as my frame of reference, attempt to elucidate some of the biases which have prevented US sociologists of religion from grasping the power dynamics behind the use of the concept “popular religion” (II). I continue with some specific reflections about this concept to overcome what I understand to be the central shortcomings of its use in the US context (III). In (IV) I pose a question that synthesizes some of the issues.

I

I begin with the presupposition that concepts, ideas, theories, and the like do not exist *in abstracto* but rather are produced by specialists that are limited and biased by the specific historical and social context in which they are immersed. We can therefore say that concepts, theories and the like, because they are produced in a given social context, are always linked to certain social positions and structures, and thus bias these positions and structures over others. This is to say, intellectual production is never neutral, but always conditioned and interested. In a word, then, I take as my point of departure the sociology of knowledge, which, following Karl Mannheim, I define as that branch of sociology that has as its object of analysis the study of the relationship between mental structures and social structures.¹ The sociology of

knowledge rejects the naïve idealism of the history of ideas, and posits that intellectual production is always conditioned and mediated by social psychological, cultural, and structural factors. Methodologically the sociology of knowledge challenges scholars to reflect on the social conditions of their intellectual production.² A failure to engage in this type of critical reflection would imply that concepts, theories, and the like are universalizable, absolute, neutral. But the sociology of knowledge would argue that such a contention is an illusion that is made possible by intellectual production under certain social conditions.

II

Taking as point of departure these insights from the sociology of knowledge, I want to ask two questions. First, given that all intellectual production is biased by social conditions, what, then, are the biases of US sociology of religion? And, second, what is the relationship between these biases and the appropriation and use of the concept “popular religion” by US sociologists of religion? I want to argue here that sociology of religion in the USA—due to its philosophical, theoretical, and methodological limits—has not been able to grasp the fact that at the heart of popular religion exists an asymmetrical power dynamic. More specifically, I want to argue that the biases which have kept US sociology of religion from developing a theory of religious power and interests are the same biases which keep it from grasping the power dynamic that makes possible the dichotomy between “popular” and “official” religion. But what are these biases? Although I cannot develop here an analysis of the relationship between the dominant approaches to US sociology of religion and the social context in which they were produced,³ I do, however, want to argue that, due to reasons that the sociology of knowledge could elucidate, the dominant paradigm in US sociology of religion has been what Jürgen Habermas in *Theory and Practice* has called the “theory of social integration.”⁴

According to Habermas, the “theory of social integration” “seeks to understand the social system as a structure of harmoniously equalized and enduring order.”⁵ This paradigm posits a congruous relationship between individuals and society, and views religion as a promoter of social harmony and integration, and as a bastion against socially destabilizing individualism. Moreover, the “theory of social integration” conceptualizes all social antagonism, domination, and conflict as a kind of synthesis, as a necessary agonistic dimension of modern societies. Theoretically, this approach is limited to an analysis of the status quo, and methodologically, it seeks social adjustment via social engineering. On the other hand, this paradigm is bereft of critical historical and structural perspectives that, for example, would allow one to trace the genesis and functions of the religious field as well as develop an analysis of structural homologies between this and other social fields. Mannheim’s description of the state of US sociology in the 1920s puts in relief the central elements of this “integrationist” approach:

The outlines of a sociology which is indifferent to the historical time-element were already perceivable in America [i.e. the USA], where the dominant type of mentality became more completely and more quickly congruent with the reality of capitalistic society . . . In America, the sociology derived from the philosophy of history was discarded at a rather early date. Sociology, instead of being an adequate picture of the structure of the whole of society, split up into a series of discrete technical problems of social readjustment.⁶

In retrospect, this sketch seems to be an adequate historical account of the limits of US sociology. Indeed, those sociological movements that crystallized in the USA such as, for instance, symbolic interactionism, Parsonian functionalism, ethnomethodology, and phenomenological and dramaturgical sociologies all seem have in common a lack of critical historical and dialectical approaches. In order to begin to fully understand the implications of this bias we would need to reflect on US sociology's deep roots in American Pragmatism, and specifically, this philosophical school's affinities with capitalist society. But I cannot get into this here.

The "theory of social integration" can be traced back to the Enlightenment, especially to the view that, once freed from the yoke of tradition, an autonomous reason would shepherd individuals and societies toward progress and prosperity. This view had its social philosophical expression, for instance, in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant. Although Rousseau was well aware of the oppressive side of society,⁷ he still remained optimistic about the intersubjective possibilities of a reason crystallized in the *social contract* and *general will* that could transcend the pernicious egoism of interest and self-preservation by legitimating and grounding an order where society and the individual could exist in a congruous relation.⁸ Through the creation *ex nihilo* of a general will, as Louis Dumont puts it, a qualitative difference emerges that transforms a collectivity of individuals into a harmonious social-moral order free from the caprice of *Homo aeconomicus* and the external coercion of Leviathan.⁹ This was possible because as Habermas has suggested, Rousseau believed that the sovereign power could be "internalized" by all, thus bringing about the "transformation of corrupted human nature into the moral person of the citizen."¹⁰ Kant like Rousseau also saw in the social or original contract more than a Hobbesian external check on ego.¹¹

In terms of classical social theory, this first approach toward modernization and modernity was further advanced by Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel. Although aware of the pathological aspects of society,¹² these two thinkers still demonstrated an overall optimism toward the Enlightenment project and specifically the process of societal modernization, postulating a positive correlation between the division of labor and the differentiation of society, on the one hand, and the moralization of society and the rise of a robust—and socially harmonizing—individualism, on the other. Durkheim conceptualized this correlation through his notion of a society's development from "mechanical" to "organic solidarity," which allowed him to posit a positive relationship between social development and social integration. From here, following Rousseau, he added that this integration led to a moralization of society that in turn would produce a thicker social reality.¹³

Simmel also had this understanding of the interrelationship between social differentiation, the division of morality, and the rise of individualism.¹⁴ In addition, Simmel's notion of "social forms" further undergirds his optimistic view of society, echoing the perspectives of Durkheim, Rousseau and Kant. For instance, Simmel considered even "conflict" and "domination" to be social forms as they led to interaction among individuals and thus the perpetuation of society.¹⁵

As I suggested above, the majority—and undoubtedly the most influential—US sociological theories of religion have taken this "integrationist" approach as point of departure. This to the extent that they accept the presupposition of the harmonious and integrating relationship between society, morality and the individual. These sociological theories of religion understand religion as, on the one hand, a carrier of certain political liberal values which functions as a vehicle of social integration and maintenance, and, on the other hand, as a bulwark against the destructive forces of pernicious individualism. In other words, these theories view religion as promoting and harmonizing American values in a sense reminiscent of the thesis of Alexis de Tocqueville.¹⁶

Let me now provide some examples of how I see this "theory of social integration" played out in US sociology of religion. Consider, for instance, Talcott Parsons' notion of "denominational pluralism." Attempting to transcend the limits of Ernst Troeltsch's church-sect typology,¹⁷ and in particular its inability to describe the American religious landscape, Parsons rejected the notion that a plurality of Christian churches was a symptom of religious disintegration of the kind postulated by secularization theorists, and argued that "American society has produced the most highly developed version of the pluralistic ecumenical religious constitution that has so far appeared within a national framework."¹⁸ For Parsons denominational pluralism was a manifestation of political pluralism and a sign of its vitality. In the Durkheimian sense the plurality of denominations pointed to religious tolerance consistent with the individualism promoted by political liberalism; at the same time, argued Parsons, this religious pluralism could function because it was rooted in a "deeper moral community."¹⁹

Consider, too, H.R. Niebuhr's sociological understanding of religion. Although substantially more skeptical than Parsons about the notion that denominational pluralism was a sign of a healthy political liberal culture, or perhaps better put, protecting religion against sociological reductions,²⁰ Niebuhr still theorized under the presuppositions of this first approach to modernity, and thus still held on to both the language of individualism, and the belief that deep rooted political liberal values could integrate American society. Thus, for instance, in his reflections on the immigrant churches, Niebuhr acknowledges that the American religious field "has given to each immigrant group the privilege of maintaining and developing its own religious faith."²¹ At the same time he recognized the assimilating function of American religion, arguing that it "has placed the immigrant churches in an environment of free competition, unprotected and unmolested by state interference, and so it has provided the background for a process of religious accommodation, of a kind of religious Americanization."²²

Robert Bellah's sociology of religion, too, is an example of this first approach to modernization and modernity. Indeed, his notion of "civil religion" clearly follows a Rousseauian–Durkheimian trajectory.²³ For instance, recently Bellah had this to say about the relationship between American culture and religion: "Beneath the surface glitter of American culture there is a deep inner core, which, I have argued, is ultimately religious: the sacredness of the conscience of every single individual."²⁴ In addition to his thesis of "civil religion," Bellah has also theorized about the important role religion plays in cultivating "healthy" forms of individualism. For instance, in "The House Divided," the introduction to the updated edition of *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah and his colleagues recognize religion's function in promoting the "biblical and civic republican understandings of life" that put in check the destructive "ideology of neocapitalism" and "utilitarian" and "expressive individualism."²⁵ In Professor Bellah's theory of religion, like Parsons and Niebuhr, integration is given priority over conflict.

In response to what we can call the classical contributions to US sociology of religion by Parsons, Niebuhr, and Bellah, a new generation of sociologists have in the last decades developed new theories that attempt, for example, to use the metaphors of the "market" and "argument/conversation," to put in question some of the presuppositions of earlier works that failed either to pay sufficient attention to issues of diversity and pluralism or to account for a changing US religious field. Examples of these theories are Steven Tipton's "public theology,"²⁶ Stephen Warner's "new paradigm,"²⁷ and Christian Smith's "subcultural identity theory" of religion.²⁸ Although these new perspectives attempt to incorporate notions of change and diversity, they still work under the presuppositions of the first approach to modernization and modernity, and thus fail to question the issue of religious power and interest, and address the contested and asymmetrical nature of the US religious field.

This "theory of social integration" which I have been arguing is the dominant paradigm in US sociology of religion, has eclipsed another approach to the social which Habermas has called "theory of social conflict."²⁹ Again, the sociology of knowledge can provide insight as to why this is the case. Why is it that this approach which I am about to briefly outline has been eclipsed in the US although it has been so dominant in other contexts as, for example, Latin America and certain parts of Europe?³⁰

Unlike the "integrationist" paradigm, the theory of social conflict "seeks to understand [the] . . . social system as an association of domination kept open and in flux by internal opposition."³¹ Thus, it focuses on the adverse consequences of the process of modernization, viewing society not as a harmonizing and integrating system, but rather as a contested and unresolved dialectic of violence and negation. This second approach argues, moreover, that the moralization of society, the rise of modern notions of the individual, and political liberalism have their limits and their costs. For instance, Karl Marx was perhaps the first to develop a systematic critical theory of modernity that viewed the advancement of capitalism at the cost of the growing commodification of life in general, and the alienation and pauperization of the wage laborer in particular. Although critical of Marx's reductionist economism, Max Weber too was concerned with the

process of modernization and the conditions of modernity, arguing, for example, that the “rationalization” of society would result in the reduction of human freedom and creativity. He illustrated this pessimism most vigorously through his well-known metaphor of the “iron cage” and his allusion to Goethe: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.”³² The founders of the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, radicalized Weber through their critique of an instrumental rationality that had penetrated all realms of life, even intellectual production.³³ More recently, Jürgen Habermas has continued this critical theoretical trajectory with his critique of “functionalist reason” as developed, for example, in his thesis of the “colonization of the lifeworld.”³⁴ And Enrique Dussel likewise, taking as point of departure the scandalous reality of Latin America—what he calls “the underside of modernity”—has brought together, for example, Marx’s critique of political economy, dependency theory’s critical analysis of globalization, and Levinasian ethics, synthesizing these into a critical theoretical paradigm he has termed the “philosophy of liberation.”³⁵

Few US sociological theories of religion have taken this critical paradigm as point of departure; and not surprisingly, the majority of those that have write from the perspective of a marginalized group—for example, Ana María Díaz-Stevens,³⁶ Otto Maduro,³⁷ and Cornel West.³⁸ What these theorists have in common is that they begin with the fact of domination and issues of power, and view religion both as a source of identity and as a vehicle for social empowerment. As I will now argue in my next section, if the concept of popular religion is to be used in a way consistent with its historical development and its position in the religious field, then it necessarily requires the “theory of social conflict” as its ground.

III

Any use of the concept “popular religion” necessarily needs to address the issue of religious power, and specifically engage the relationship between popular religion and domination. This must be its point of departure. But this already poses a problem for US sociology of religion, for as I have suggested, due to biases which are revealed to us by the sociology of knowledge, the majority of US sociologies of religion have failed to substantially address this issue of religious interest and power.³⁹ Why is it, for example, that among the many studies of Hispanic popular religion that have recently emerged in the USA, none has attempted to engage the relationship that exists between the fact that in the USA a disproportionate amount of religious symbols and expressions that are termed “popular” are of Hispanic origin, and this group’s marginalized place in US society? This hiatus, I argue, is a symptom of the biases present in US sociology of religion.

I contend that the term “popular religion” has to be understood as that concept used to categorize those religious beliefs and practices that are located outside the limits of the set of religious beliefs and practices that a

given society declares “orthodox” and “official.” In other words, we can say that popular religion is a term used to describe the negation of what a society deems to be legitimate representations and expressions of religiosity. The fact that this definition is negative, as it defines what popular religion is not, points to the fact that from the point of view of those socially acceptable, and therefore dominant, religious beliefs and practices, popular religion exists at the margins of the entire constellation of religious phenomena. But this definition has been uncritically accepted and appropriated by most studies of popular religion in the USA.

This is why a US sociology of popular religion will need to question what is understood to be the “legitimate” religious boundaries established by the dominant, which since the modern epoch, have given pride of place to what we could call—in the Weberian sense—rationalized religion: i.e., those religious beliefs and practices that have been differentiated from other spheres, have a systematized world view, division of labor, routinized practices, and institutionalized structures.

Allow me to sketch—in broad strokes—from a Weberian perspective a genealogy of the religious field as a way of critically approaching the power dynamic that lies behind the “popular”/“official” distinction. According to Weber’s theory of religious evolution, the rationalization of religious phenomena begins with the “theoretical mastery of reality,” i.e. intellectual rationalization, which historically manifests itself through the development of soteriologies, theologies, ethical systems and religious doctrines. But this process of intellectual rationalization can only emerge along with the socio-economic conditions associated with urbanization because “[t]he lot of peasants is so strongly tied to nature, so dependent on organic processes and natural events, and economically so little oriented to rational systematization.”⁴⁰ According to Bourdieu,

... technological, economic, and social transformations that are correlated with the birth and development of towns, and in particular advances in the division of labor and the appearance of the separation of intellectual and physical labor, constitute the common condition of two processes that can only unfold in relationship of interdependence and reciprocal reinforcement, namely the constitution of a relatively autonomous religious field and the development of need for the “moralization” and “systematization” of religious beliefs and practices.⁴¹

Thus, it is with the development of towns that the division of intellectual and physical labor emerges, and with it the transformation of materialistic, practical, and piecemeal religious expressions characteristic of bucolic life into the more abstract and “ever-broadening rational systematization of the god concept and of the thinking concerning the possible relationship of man to the divine,” that becomes the defining characteristic of metropolitan life.⁴² This “ever-broadening” intellectual process that can only emerge with urban life (as only urban life can support the division of labor needed for intellectual production) specifically leads to the positing of a supernatural realm (and thus the positing of a dualistic ontology), the rise of soteriologies, the transition from polytheism to henotheism and eventually to monotheism, and the emergence of theological systems that aim to make sense of this

intellectual space that emerges between individuals and the transcendent. Or stated another way, this process manifests itself through the moralization and cognitive systematization of religious beliefs which, argues Weber, eventually leads to the rise of “world rejecting” religions, i.e. religions that, having achieved a certain threshold of cognitive development, are able to posit a transcendental or supernatural value sphere which provides the conditions of possibility for the systematization of “practical impulses for action.”⁴³ With the intellectual rationalization of religion, individuals are now able to “dominate and transcend . . . in this act of knowledge” what they once could only “passively endure,” namely, “suffering and other limitations imposed by the conditions of their existence.”⁴⁴ In the words of Marx, “from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of ‘pure’ theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc.”⁴⁵

Eventually, these interconnected processes of the intellectual rationalization of the religious sphere and urbanization lead to, on the one hand, the routinization of religious practices, and, on the other, the emergence of religious specialists. As to the first, the routinization of religious practices is what we earlier called the moment of praxeological rationalization, which as we may recall has to do with “the methodical attainment of a definitely given and practical end by means of an increasingly precise calculation of adequate means.” If intellectual rationalization, as we saw, provides the conditions of possibility for the systematization of “practical impulses for action,” praxeological rationalization has to do with the development and implementation of the technologies—e.g., prayer, sacrifice, rite, etc.—that materialize these “impulses for action” as “practical mastery.”⁴⁶ This process of the praxeological rationalization of religion, then, can be understood as the nexus between religious ideas and what Weber termed a religion’s “economic ethic,”⁴⁷ or what more recently Habermas has called “value actualization.”⁴⁸ But more germane for our purpose here, we must point out that this systematization of religious practices characteristic of urban life begins to differentiate itself from the less consistent and structured religious action of rural life. For the

. . . dependence on magic for influencing the irrational forces of nature cannot play the same role for the urban dweller as for the farmer. At the same time, it is clear that the economic foundation of the urban man’s life has a far more rational essential character, namely, calculability and capacity for purposive manipulation.⁴⁹

Thus, what was once a relatively homogeneous constellation of religious symbols and expressions is now differentiated into two distinct and potentially antagonistic forms: (i) the materialistic and piecemeal religion of rural life, and (ii) the intellectual and rationalized religion of urban life.

As to the second, the emergence of religious specialists further advances this process of rationalization by bringing about the functional differentiation of religious phenomena, and with this, the consolidation and aggregation of religious power and interest that correspond with, and perpetuate these nascent religious functions. With this development rationalized religion

achieves a more permanent and purposive configuration, as specialists, driven by the logic of their function, must now delineate a space of legitimate religiosity, and moreover, they must defend the boundaries of this space against those religious expressions that fall outside its limits and/or threaten the “purity” or “sacredness” of this space. Thus we have the rise of the priesthood with its “professional equipment of special knowledge, fixed doctrine, and vocational qualifications,”⁵⁰ which uses the techniques of “preaching” and “pastoral care” to influence the congregation,⁵¹ and, as such, is defined over and against “magicians,” “sorcerers” and all those that are concerned with the “individual,” “occasional” and “coercive” efforts of non-rationalized religious practices.⁵² Analogously, we have the rise of the religious intellectual or theologian, who is in the business of “disenchantment,” i.e. of transforming—via intellectual rationalization—“the concept of the world into the problem of meaning,” and hence, has interests that are diametrically opposed to the interests of those that aim to promote non-rationalized, i.e., “magical,” religious knowledge.⁵³ There arises, therefore, along with the division of religious labor the division of religious knowledge and practice, steered by religious specialists and used for the monopolization of the production and distribution of religiosity. Thus, at the epicenter of the rationalized sacred space we have the religious specialists, at its periphery the congregation, and outside its boundaries the unreligious, i.e. the peasants and all those that have not yet been exposed or converted to rationalized religion.

The rise of religious specialists as carriers of rationalized religious interests antagonizes the relationship between urban and rural religion transforming it into a power relationship, which—from the vantage point of urban religion—is viewed as a relationship between the “primitive” religiosity of the peasant and the more “sophisticated” religiosity of the urban artisan. Bourdieu has explained this development thus:

Given, on one side, the relation that links the degree of systematization and moralization of religion to the degree of development of the religious apparatus and, on the other, the relation that links progress in the division of religious labor to progress in the division of labor and urbanization, most authors tend to accord to magic the characteristics of systems of practices and representations belonging to the least economically developed social formations or to the most disadvantaged social classes of class-divided societies. Most authors might agree that magical practices aim at concrete and specific goals, both particular and immediate (in opposition to the more abstract, more general, and more distant ends that would be those of religion); that they are inspired by an intention to coerce or manipulate supernatural powers (in opposition to the propitiatory and contemplative dispositions of “prayer” for example); or that they live enclosed in the formalism and ritualism of *do ut des*. This is because all these traits—which originate in conditions of existence dominated by an economic urgency prohibiting all distancing from present and immediate needs and unfavorable to the development of competent scholars in the field—are, obviously, more often found in societies or social classes more impoverished from an economic point of view and thus predisposed to occupying a dominated position in the relation of material and thus symbolic power. But there is more: every dominated practice or belief is doomed to appear as *profanatory*, inasmuch as, by its very existence and in the absence of any intention of profanation, it constitutes an objective contestation of the monopoly over the administration of the sacred, and therefore of the *legitimacy* of the holders of this monopoly.⁵⁴

Thus unfolds the primordial and archetypal power relationship of the religious sphere, a relationship homologous to the relationship that—in more modern contexts—exists between dominant, i.e. “orthodox” religion and dominated, i.e. “popular” religion.

This process of the rationalization of religion reaches its apogee with the crystallization of the third moment of spherical rationalization, namely, structural or institutional rationalization. At this juncture religious beliefs and practices are objectified as a “church.” “A product of the institutionalization and bureaucratization of the prophetic sect (with all the correlative effects of ‘banalization’), the church,” Bourdieu maintains,

... shows a number of bureaucratic characteristics: explicit delimitation of areas of competence and regulated hierarchization of functions, with the correlative rationalization of rewards, “appointments,” “promotions,” and “careers”; codification of the rules regulating professional activity and extraprofessional life; rationalization of the tools of labor, such as dogma and liturgy, and of professional training and so forth.⁵⁵

Once this transformation happens and religious beliefs and practices become embodied in institutional structures, the logic of religious interests are transformed as no longer are interests pursued by religious specialists, but function at the institutional level.

As this brief genealogy suggests, the use of the concept of popular religion must reflect the fact that the dichotomy between “orthodox” and “popular” religion could only have emerged along with the rationalization of the religious sphere, for only then could rationalized religion proclaim its religious beliefs and practices “legitimate” and “orthodox,” and declare non-rationalized religious beliefs and practices “illegitimate” and “heterodox.” It is only with the rationalization of the religious sphere—and thus only according to the logic of rationalization—that rationalized or modern religion is able to establish itself as the dominant mode of religious expression, and by so doing dominate the nonrationalized religion. The perspective of the sociology of knowledge begins to explain the relationship between the position that historically the academic field has occupied in the division of social labor and the dominant paradigms in the sociology of religion which have tended to bias the intellectual, abstract, rationalized, differentiated, ethical, and congregational religion of urban life over the “mythical,” “magical,” concrete, materialistic, piecemeal, and practically oriented religion of rural life. But this sounds very similar to the critique of the distinction “magic”/“religion.” What then is the difference between the dichotomies “magic”/“religion” and “popular”/“official”? This needs to be further examined. Is this a trivial distinction? Are the terms used consistently? Although I cannot engage this issue here, I would briefly suggest that the distinction between these dichotomies is correlated with different divisions of labor. While the “magic”/“religion” dichotomy emerged along with the rise of the division of rural and urban labor, the dichotomy “popular”/“official” emerged along with the differentiation of the division of labor within urban societies.⁵⁶

The historical material substantiates this contention. A glance at the genesis of what in the Americas has traditionally been termed “popular religion” supports the claim that this nomenclature has been used to categorize the religious beliefs and practices of the dominated. For instance, we can identify three ideal-types of popular religiosity that emerged in the Americas during the conquest and colonization: (i) the religious beliefs and practices of the African slave; this religiosity was a product of the syncretism between African religions and Iberian Catholicism;⁵⁷ (ii) the religious beliefs and practices of the *mestizo* which grew out of the syncretism between indigenous religions and Iberian Catholicism;⁵⁸ and (iii) the religious beliefs and practices of the *campesino* (peasant) which emerged in the rural areas due to the relative absence of religious institutions.⁵⁹ All three—the African, the *mestizo*, and the *campesino*—were historically dominated people; all three developed their religious symbols and expressions in a context of violence. And this is why it is fallacious to argue that popular religion emerged in the Americas out of some harmonious and symmetrical syncretism, a *raza cósmica* that, for example, José Vasconcelos naively romanticized.⁶⁰ Rather, the syncretisms that gave rise to popular religion were not symmetrical, even exchanges of worldviews and practices. The religion of the dominant, i.e. Iberian Catholicism,⁶¹ had leverage over the religions of the dominated. This is why it is more accurate to say that popular religion was—and still is today—the expression of the marginalized, demonized, and dominated. Indeed, popular religion provides the dominated with a space for the perpetuation of their threatened culture by protecting against assimilationist forces,⁶² and functioning as a vehicle of social empowerment.⁶³ Thus, the religiosity of the African slave was an attempt to tally with the absurdity of slavery, that is, as Cornel West puts it, “an attempt to make sense out of a meaningless and senseless predicament.”⁶⁴ The religiosity of the *mestizo* was an attempt to reconstruct those remaining fragments of belief systems that were extirpated along with the great Amerindian civilizations.⁶⁵ And the religiosity of the *campesino* was an attempt to make religious sense out of the constraining material conditions of rural life, given the relative absence of institutional religion. And analogously, it must be pointed out that it is not by chance that the majority of those religious expressions that are termed “popular” in the US are of Latino origin and that US Hispanics are located at the periphery of US society—i.e. a disproportionate number of Latinos live below the poverty line, are undereducated, and politically underrepresented.⁶⁶ This is why the religiosity of US Hispanics must also be understood as an attempt to buffer a lifeworld from assimilationist forces, an attempt to perpetuate a culture that is slowly disintegrating.

IV

I want to end with a question posed from the perspective of the sociology of US Hispanic popular religion which synthesizes some of the issues I have raised. Structurally does a homology exist between the instrumentalization

of Mexican culture by the fast-food aphorism—*Yo quiero Taco Bell*—or the commodification and consumption of the Hispanic culture as the “exotic” and “erotic”, as illustrated by the recent popularity of Latinos such as Jennifer Lopez, Enrique Iglesias, and Ricky Martin, and the categorization of Hispanic beliefs and practices as “popular”? In other words, does a structural homology exist between the position of Hispanics in the US cultural field and their position in the US religious field?

In order to engage this question and do justice to it, US sociology of religion needs to push beyond the “integrationist” presuppositions that have historically kept it from developing a critical theory of US religious interests and power. This bias manifests itself today through the phenomenological analysis of popular religion that has recently come to dominate under the new rubric of ethnographic sociology. If the concept of popular religion is to be used in a way that is free from the biases of US sociology of religion, then critical-historical and structural approaches need to be marshaled. Only in this way will the power dynamic that is played out in the religious field, and which, through structural homologies, extends to other social fields, be uncovered.

NOTES

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¹ *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1936), 264–266.

² Pierre Bourdieu has emphasized “reflexivity” as one of the essential elements of his methodology: “Indeed, I believe that the *sociology of sociology* is a *fundamental dimension of sociological epistemology*. Far from being a specialty among others, it is the necessary prerequisite of any rigorous sociological practice. In my view, one of the chief sources of error in the social sciences resides in an uncontrolled relation to the object which results in the projection of this relation onto the object. What distresses me when I read some works by sociologists is that people whose profession it is to objectivize the social world prove so rarely able to objectivize themselves, and fail so often to realize that what their apparently scientific discourse talks about is not the object but their relation to the object.” Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 68–69.

³ A sociology of US sociology of religion might begin to shed some light both on this correlation and the theoretical hiatus that exists in the sociology of religion. This relative absence of sociological analyses of religious interest and sociological analyses of popular religiosity—which I am arguing are correlated—substantiates what Bourdieu once said about “the supreme classifier among classifiers,” *Homo academicus*, viz., that s/he too is interested, by which he meant that there is a logic of interest present in the academic field which is driven, on the one hand, by the law of the accumulation of academic capital, and, on the other, by an individual’s position in the academic field. *Homo Academicus* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).

- ⁴ *Theory and Practice* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1973), 210.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ *Ideology and Utopia*, 254.
- ⁷ Consider, for example, *The First and Second Discourses* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964).
- ⁸ *The Social Contract*, ed. Roger D. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 53.
- ⁹ Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 88.
- ¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1973), 97.
- ¹¹ For example, see his *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- ¹² For example, Durkheim's concern with the destructive forces of societal modernization as developed in *Suicide* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1951) and Simmel's critical theoretical concern with the increase in what he called "objective culture" which he saw as a particular characteristic of modernity. See his "Subjective Culture," *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 227–234.
- ¹³ For example, Durkheim maintained that "Society is not, then, as has often been thought, a stranger to the moral world, or something which has only secondary repercussions upon it. It is, on the contrary, the necessary condition of its existence. It is not a simple juxtaposition of individuals who bring an intrinsic morality with them, but rather man is a moral being only because he lives in society, since morality consists in being solidary with a group and varying with this solidarity. Let all social life disappear, and moral life will disappear with it, since it would no longer have any objective. The state of nature of the philosophers of the eighteenth century, if not immoral, is, at least, amoral. Rousseau himself recognized this." "Division of Labor in Society: Conclusion," in *Emile Durkheim: On Morality and Society*, ed. Robert Bellah (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 137.
- ¹⁴ For instance, Simmel writes: "Individuation of personality, on the one hand, and the influences, interests, and relationships that attach the personality to its social circle, on the other hand, show a pattern of interdependent development that appears in the most diverse historical and institutional setting as a typical form." "Group Expansion and the Development of Individuality," *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms*, 252.
- ¹⁵ This perspective allowed Simmel to argue, for example, that "conflict" was a "unifying" and "integrative" element in society. And he stated the following about "domination": "Even in the most oppressive and cruel cases of subordination, there is still a considerable measure of personal freedom." (97) Georg Simmel, "Conflict" and "Domination," *ibid.*, 70–120.
- ¹⁶ Tocqueville argued the Rousseauian thesis that religion could serve to cultivate liberal democratic values and thus promote social stability: "The greatest advantage of religions is to inspire diametrically contrary urges. Every religion places the object of man's desires outside and beyond worldly goods and naturally lifts the soul into regions far above the realm of the senses. Every religion also imposes on each man some obligations toward mankind, to be performed in common with the rest of mankind, and so draws him away, from time to time, from thinking about himself." *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 444.
- ¹⁷ *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, Vol. II (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); see especially "Results of This Survey," 993–1013.

18. Talcott Parsons, "Christianity," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, ed. David L. Sills (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 443.

19. *Ibid.*, 295.

20. Indeed, unlike Parsons, Niebuhr argued that "denominationalism" was the result of ecclesial imperatives and human caprice: "The evil of denominationalism lies in the conditions which make the rise of sects desirable and necessary: in the failure of the churches to transcend the social conditions which fashion them into caste-organizations, to sublimate their loyalties to standards and institutions only remotely relevant if not contrary to the Christian ideal, to resist the temptation of making their own self-preservation and extension the primary object of their endeavor." *Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1987), 21.

21. *Ibid.*, 201.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 168–189.

24. Robert Bellah, "Unitarian Universalism in Societal Perspective," Presented at the Unitarian Universalist Association, General Assembly, Rochester, New York, 27 June 1998, 23.

25. Robert Bellah et al., "The House Divided," *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, updated edition with a new introduction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), vii–xxxix; see also chapter 6, "Individualism," 142–163.

26. According to Tipton, "the idea of public theology offers an instructive counterpoint to conceiving religion and politics in terms of a unitary *civil religion* or *public philosophy*. In doing so, it develops insights long shared by the social study of religion and the cultural history of theology into the dialectical process by which religion enters into the cultural constitution of all social institutions, particularly the polity, even as social differences imprint the structures of religious community and belief . . . History and theology grow out of each other. This diversifies publics in both politics and religion yet makes for coherence of conversation among them." "Public Theology," in *The Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1998), 624.

27. The central thesis of Warner's "new paradigm" is that "organized religion thrives in the United States in an open market system." This presupposes an "equilibrated" pluralistic context free of, for example, contested exchanges. "Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* vol. 98, no. 5 (March 1993), 1044. See also his more recent reflections on this paradigm: "Approaching Religious Diversity: Barriers, Byways, and Beginnings," *Sociology of Religion* vol. 59, no. 3 (Fall 1998), 193–215.

28. Christian Smith explains one of the presuppositions of his "subcultural identity theory" thus: "Theoretically, then, religion in modernity does not have to choose between gradual surrender ('accommodation') and defensively hunkering down for a bleak future ('resistance') . . . As an alternative, religious groups can grow strong through the tensions and conflicts that arise between themselves and other groups and subcultures in a pluralistic context, which fortify their own identities and their members' commitment, unity, participation, and resource contributions. In this way, modernity's cultural pluralism can actually positively benefit religious subcultures by providing a greater variety of other groups and subcultures against which to 'rub' and feel distinction and tension, in a way that strengthens

religious subcultural life internally." *American Evangelicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 116.

²⁹. *Theory and Practice*, 210.

³⁰. The works of Otto Maduro, Enrique Dussel, Cristián Parker, and François Houtart come to mind.

³¹. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, 210.

³². *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 182.

³³. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1997).

³⁴. See *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume Two: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1987).

³⁵. Consider, for instance, his *Método para una filosofía de la liberación* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1974).

³⁶. See "Analyzing Popular Religiosity for Socio-Religious Meaning," in *Enduring Flame: Studies on Latino Popular Religiosity*, PARAL, Volume One, eds Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo and Ana María Díaz-Stevens (New York: Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies, 1994), 17–36.

³⁷. Consult "Notes Toward a Sociology of Latina/o Religious Empowerment," in *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise*, eds Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Fernando F. Segovia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 151–166 and "Directions for a Reassessment of Latina/o Religion," in *Enigmatic Powers: Syncretism with African and Indigenous Peoples' Religions Among Latinos*, PARAL, Volume Three, 47–68.

³⁸. See *Prophecy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1982) and *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), especially "Part One: Religion and Politics," 3–152.

³⁹. For example, I recently reviewed over three decades of articles published in the journals *Sociology of Religion*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Cristianismo y Sociedad*, and *Social Compass* and I found that the European and Latin American journals had substantially more articles that were directly dealing with issues of religious interest and power.

⁴⁰. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), 80.

⁴¹. Pierre Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field," *Comparative Social Research*, 1991, 13: 1–44.

⁴². Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 27.

⁴³. Max Weber, "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds C. Wright Mills and Hans H. Gerth (Oxford: 1958), 267. We cannot go into the complexities and nuances of this intellectual process here. For a treatment of the relationship between what we are calling intellectual rationalization, the process of urbanization, and the rise of soteriologies, theologies, doctrines, and religious ethics, consult, for example, the first three chapters of Max Weber's *The Sociology of Religion*, 1–45.

⁴⁴. Robert Bellah, "Religious Evolution," *Beyond Belief*, 25.

⁴⁵. Karl Marx, "The German Ideology," in *The Marx–Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), 159.

⁴⁶. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field," 10.

⁴⁷. Max Weber, "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, 267.

⁴⁸. *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume One, Reason and the Rationalization of Society (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984), 187.

⁴⁹. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 97.

50. Ibid., 29.

51. Ibid., 75.

52. Ibid., 28.

53. Ibid., 125.

54. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field," 13.

55. Ibid., 24.

56. An important contribution to the relationship between popular religion and the division of urban labor has been made by Cristián Parker. See his "Religión y clases subalternas en una sociedad dependiente: un estudio de caso en Chile," CSRS, Catholic University of Louvain, Louvain, Belgium, 1986 and *Otra lógica en América Latina: Religión popular y modernización capitalista* (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993). Unfortunately, like most of the great scholarship that has emerged from Latin America, the work of Parker has been relatively ignored by US sociologists of religion. Ask any sociologist of religion in the USA whether s/he has heard of the work of Cristián Parker. The majority will answer "no." Why? Ask the sociology of knowledge.

57. For some contextualized analyses of this first type of popular religion consult Mercedes Cros Sandoval, "Afro-Cuban Religion in Perspective," and Migene González-Wippler, "Santería: Its Dynamics and Multiple Roots," in *Enigmatic Powers: Syncretism with African and Indigenous Peoples' Religions Among Latinos*, Volume Three, PARAL, 81–98 and 99–111.

58. Consult, for example, David Carrasco, "Jaguar Christians in the Contact Zone," in *ibid.*, 69–79.

59. The type of popular religion that has been associated with rural life in the Americas has its roots in the relative absence of ecclesial structures in these parts. As a result, the religious beliefs and practices found in rural areas have historically been less structured, institutionalized, and thus less "orthodox" vis-à-vis urban religion where the majority of the ecclesial structures and specialists have historically been located. This relationship between urban and rural religion has received substantial theoretical treatment by sociologists of religion starting from as early as Max Weber and his theory of religious evolution and most recently by Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of religious power and legitimation. We will come back to this below, for as we shall see, this relationship between urban and rural religion can be viewed as the primordial and archetypal manifestation of the distinction between "orthodox" and "popular" religion.

60. José Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica: La misión de la raza iberoamericana* (Barcelona: Espasa Calpe, 1925).

61. We must point out that the Iberian Catholicism that arrived in the Americas was also a syncretism, but an institutionalized, i.e. rationalized, syncretism that was in the position of power and as such gave the *illusion* of homogeneity, of "purity." Thus, from another angle we arrive at the power relationship implicit in the dichotomy between "orthodox" and "popular" religion, here in the mode of "pure" and "syncretistic" religion. But this will become clearer in the final section when we investigate the genesis of institutionalized religion.

62. For an analysis of Hispanic popular religion as a bastion of identity and culture see Orlando Espín, "Popular Catholicism: Alienation or Hope?" in *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 91–110.

63. For some reflection on the empowering role of religion consult, Otto Maduro, "Notes Toward a Sociology of Latina/o Religious Empowerment," in *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenges and Promise*, 151–66, and also "Directions for a

Reassessment of Latina/o Religion,” in *Enigmatic Powers: Syncretism with African and Indigenous Peoples’ Religions Among Latinos*, PARAL, Volume Three, 47–68.

^{64.} Cornel West, “The Prophetic Tradition in Afro-America,” in *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 43.

^{65.} See, for instance, Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of “the Other” and the Myth of Modernity* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

^{66.} For an empirical analysis of the marginalized status of the US Hispanic population see Manuel J. Mejido, “U.S. Hispanics/Latinos and the Field of Graduate Theological Education,” *Theological Education*, vol. 34, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 51–71.

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