

Article

Popular Religions and Multiple Modernities: A Framework for Understanding Current Religious Transformations

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Abstract: Popular, ethnic, and folk religions endure in all regions of the planet, but specially in underdeveloped or developing non-Western countries. The main objective of this paper was to propose a framework for understanding this popular religious trend. Although religion in general has previously been linked to multiple modernities, the revitalization of popular religions has not. While Eisenstadt's original theory of multiple modernities has been criticized on several aspects, his interpretative approach is valid provided that the contradictory dynamics of modernizing processes are recognized. The epistemological shift suggested by this article involves recognizing the biases that Western sociology has brought to its analysis of religions. Once we treat modernities as multiple, the specificity of each modernity opens up the spectrum of religious alternatives that flourish in every geo-cultural area. The growing diversity of popular religious expressions in the Global South stems from the fact that they are supported by thousands of believers. Their lived religions spills beyond religious institutions. These popular religiosities are the main sources of religious diversities and religious resistance in the context of multiple modernities. Lived religion and symbolic action allow us a better understanding of the magical-religious expressions of peoples of the world.

Keywords: popular religions; multiple modernities; lived religion; religious diversity

1. Introduction

Popular, ethnic, and rural folk religions endure in all regions of the planet, but specially in underdeveloped or developing non-Western countries. In many places, they are vigorous; this is especially true of urban popular religions in areas undergoing rapid modernization.

Yet the relationship between popular religion and modernization is complex. The renaissances in the major religious traditions—Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, etc.—in various parts of the world have multiple connections to modernization (Hefner 1998; Offutt 2014). This calls for an explanation that goes beyond mere criticism of the classic theories of secularization (Casanova 2006).

In Christianity, we have the emergence and expansion of Pentecostals of various kinds (Vijgen and Haak 2018), including the vertiginous diffusion of Catholic Charismatics (Eckolt 2013). Many new Evangelical churches as well as independent cults have accentuated Christian religious diversity, especially in the Global South (Pew Research Center 2011).

African and ethnic religions are growing not only in their lands of origin; they are present now in transcultural contexts (Adogame and Spickard 2010). We observe an increasing number of popular expressions of the Asiatic great religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Shinto). Folk and traditional religions attract growing numbers, although, unlike other popular religions, they are declining slightly as a percentage of a growing population (Pew Research Center 2015a). Popular religious expressions are found in Islamic contexts: in North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab countries, and in Asiatic

Islamic; each has singular characteristics. New transnational religious movements (Michel et al. 2017) and revitalized indigenous religions are emerging throughout the globalized world (Parker 2002).

Although they reflect only the surface of this phenomenon, the available statistical data demonstrate a decline in non-believers, and that in the near future, there will be more believers than today, in both raw numbers and proportional to the world population (Johnson and Zurlo 2015; Johnson and Grim 2018; Pew Research Center 2015c). In any case, popular religions and spiritualities are spreading in mass society through the new technologies of communication and information, and through migrations. They are bypassing the established churches and elitist forms of religions.

The main objective of this paper was to propose a new framework for understanding this popular religious trend in the context of multiple modernities. Although religion in general has previously been linked to multiple modernities (Beriaín 2014; Hefner 1998; Michel et al. 2017; Offutt 2014; Smith and Vaidyanathan 2011), the revitalization of popular religions has not.

A revised theory of multiple modernities will allow us to comprehend how popular religions are being reinvigorated throughout the world, especially in peripheral modernities. In the first part of this paper, we briefly develop a conceptual and methodological approach. In the second part, we review the popular religions phenomenon in order to advance a critical analysis of the multiple modernities theory. In the light of these sections, we sketch a conceptual framework for a revised theory and draw some conclusions.

2. Conceptual Scope and Methodology

Our main interest is in the diverse popular religious expressions that can be found, in the most varied circumstances, in the Global South. This diversity is not a matter of the proliferation of churches, denominations, sects or movements, religious leaders, and/or new prophets. More important is the fact that these entities are supported by thousands of faithful, whose religiosity spills beyond such formal religious institutions. This popular religiosity is the main source of religious diversities in the context of current multiple modernities.

My approach adopts an unconventional perspective that outlines a non-western-centric approach to popular religions. For this reason, we must begin with some conceptual clarifications.

First, we are referring here to religious diversity and not to religious pluralism. Indeed, our focus is on the analysis of the real diversity of religious expressions and not merely on religions' institutional forms. Pluralism should not be confused with diversity, as Beckford and Richardson (2007) have stated. The normative, regulatory, and political perspective of pluralism is very different from the descriptive level of empirical and phenomenal diversity. The challenges of religious diversity in terms of pluralism in democratic construction are enormous (Levine 2009).

Second, we start from the fact that popular religions in the Global South are being reinvigorated and are not declining (Pew Research Center 2015a). Therefore, we leave aside the long-standing controversy about the theory of secularization (Bruce 2011; Casanova 2006; Martin 2005; Yamane 1997). My focus is centered in popular religions, the spiritual and religious expressions of the masses, the powerless, the simple people who in a thousand ways express their faith in superior or superhuman realities and who maintain a special bond with these realities that is reflected in their daily lives and in their local communities.

Let us remember that there are, from a theoretical point of view, basically two orientations for the understanding of popular religions. There is the neo-Durkheimian approach that analyzes popular religions' integrative role as a sacred canopy (Berger 1967) that guides, offers meaning, cohesion, and social integration. And there is the neo-Marxist approach (Maduro 1980) that analyzes religion as an ideological factor that contributes, within the framework of social conflicts, to hegemony or counterhegemony in society.

Given the religious dynamics in Latin America over the last forty years (Parker 1993, 2005, 2016), it is relevant to remember that Marx's old slogan about religion being the "opium of the people" (Löwy 2006) stands as a background to the sociological debate about popular religions. Such

controversial affirmation contains a partial truth, not in the sense that the symbolic religious was illusory, but in the literal sense of the opium that is a relief for the suffering:

“Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people” (Marx 1969, p. 304).

Therefore, with Gramsci (1954, 1972; Nesti 1975) we can affirm that in every expression of popular religion, there is a potential protest against oppression, a sort of a historical form of the “cry of the oppressed”, a form of response to dominant society and culture.

In this respect, Byrd (2016) aesthetic-expressive component of religion is more pertinent to understanding popular religious expressions than are its cognitive-instrumental or moral-practical components. This aspect of religion articulates itself in rituals, icons, sacred music, architecture and fine art, as integrated within religious worldviews.

Finally, popular religions are a social product. They are socially constructed by people and communities. It is true that pain, suffering and anguish, love, and hope, have no geopolitical or geocultural boundaries. Yet, they have symbolic (and sometimes very real) borders because forms and semiological codes frame the answers with which cultures, religions, and spiritualities seek to channel those personal and collective feelings. Cultural and religious perceptions and mores are constantly being built into the geographic and geo-cultural landscape so that the landscape itself becomes a series of icons and mnemonics that signal religious identity and collective socio-religious meanings (Harvey 2014).

In this essay, we develop a framework to understand the role played by popular religions in the making and remaking of religions and spiritualities in the contemporary world. We say *framework* rather than *theory* because the phenomenon is complex and evolving. Our proposal is to give relevance to a bottom-up perspective: a view from the religious experience of the socially disadvantaged groups and classes and from peripheral regions and continents. This opens a different window than the one usual in the sociology of religion. It produces a set of propositions about contemporary religious evolution that should be considered hypothetical and that should be verified by in-depth examinations of popular religions in multiple sociocultural and historical circumstances.

3. Popular Religions within Multiple Modernities

The growing religious diversity and contemporary evolution of popular religions and spiritualities, mainly in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, reveals new cultural and religious patterns that can only be understood within the context of what has been called ‘multiple modernities’ (Eisenstadt 2000, 2003, 2013). However, the theory of multiple modernities has not considered popular religions nor have the abundant studies on popular religions around the world approached this phenomenon in comparative intercontinental and transnational systematic terms.

Religion is a distinctive cultural and institutional element of what Eisenstadt calls multiple modernities. But both Eisenstadt and Berger, in their analysis of religious pluralism in the framework of multiple modernities, do not address popular religions (Eisenstadt 2000, 2003; Berger 2014). These subjects of study are off their radar since their analysis focuses mostly on the social, cultural and mainstream religious phenomena, leaving aside the elite-popular dialectic, or the social classes divide, in such dynamics. Then, to understand our assessment and criticism of the concept of multiple modernities, it is necessary to take a brief comparative look at the phenomenon of worldwide popular religions to appreciate their common features and their differences precisely in the diverse contexts generated by multiple modernities.

Here are two examples of popular religion, taken from recent news. Although by no means exhaustive, they highlight the main issues raised by our subject.

On 8 December 2018, in Chile—a country where the Catholic Church is in a deep crisis of legitimacy because of pedophile clerics—more than one million faithful made a pilgrimage to the Virgin of Lo Vásquez on the route between the country’s two megacities: Santiago and Valparaíso. Chile has

only 18 million inhabitants. Many of the pilgrims were young people, replicating their grandparents' devotion to the Virgin Mary. They traveled by bicycles and not on foot, and they organized through the internet and social networks, not through churches. Their religious expression simultaneously demonstrated their religious and ecological commitment to the future.

A few weeks later, on a single day in India, an estimated 30 million Hindus attended the Kumbh Mela, a religious festival in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, where the Ganges and the Yamuna rivers meet. This ritual has become the largest in the world, with as many as 120 million attending during the entire festival period (estimate for 2013). The Hindu tradition says that drops of the nectar of immortality fell into these sacred rivers from an urn, or kumbh, that was being fought over by the gods and demons. Now millions of pilgrims come every three years to pray that the holy waters will emancipate them from the cycle of rebirth (Safi 2019).

Despite the many competing definitions of the term popular religion (Long 2005), there is a common understanding that each world religion comes in both official and popular forms. These forms exist in a dialectical tension with each other, with the popular form sometimes submitting but also sometimes rejecting the official form's authority (Possamai 2015; Vrijhof and Vaardenburg 1979; Nickerson 2008). These forms are intertwined but asymmetric: official religion defines the 'correct' and orthodox way of believing and practicing and controls religious institutions, but popular religion appeals to people's actual religious needs.

Official religion cannot just abolish the popular form, because in doing so it threatens its ties to ordinary people: peasants, workers, urban dwellers, the poor, and the downtrodden. These are the underprivileged, powerless, and subaltern social classes common in all stratified societies, who build all aspects of their culture in tension with the dominant culture (Hall 1981). They do this for religion too. These ordinary people embrace religious expressions—rituals, cults, and beliefs—that express their search for a relationship with the extraordinary (the divine, the supernatural). These expressions may be individual or communitarian, and they typically seek a more direct, effective and affective way to reach the untouchable in their everyday lives. They often involve icons and the human body. They represent a less intellectual and dogmatic type of religiosity than official religion approves.

Beyond their diverse local traditions and their multi-coloured symbolisms, the popular and ethnic religions of Latin America, Africa, and Asia share some common features. These include such things as: an attachment to life, the relevance of health and healing, a perception of evil, ritualistic and semiological symbolisms, the presence of supernatural and extraordinary energies (e.g., miracles), and a more or less accentuated distance from Western thought and rationality. Most popular religions are syncretic forms of cultural and religious traditions that can be hardly recognized if we rest upon a culturally constructed Western category—'religion'—which may not be significant in other cultural and historical contexts (Parker 2010; Stewart and Shaw 1994).

In Latin America, the dominant examples are the various popular Catholicisms, which mingle Indigenous and Iberian Catholic traditions, supplemented by African influences in the Caribbean and Atlantic coasts (Bidegain and Soler 2010; Fitó 2009; Guanche 2008; San Pedro Nieto 2006). The violent or pacific encounter between counterreformation Catholicism, the multiple native religions, and the slave trade, produced various syncretic religions that combined elements of at least two and often three of these traditions (Parker 1993, 2005, 2016; Marzal 2013). The diversity of the "Latin modernity" (the Latin American way of being modern, which has its own logics) is built on this syncretic soil. We can see this in both Pentecostal preaching and in folk-religious ritualism. It is impossible to understand Latin American religiosity without understanding this colonial encounter.

On the other side of the planet, popular religions in Eastern Asia have gained growing attention from scholars in recent decades. At one end of the development spectrum, there is a revitalization of popular religions in modernizing China; on the other end, there is the patent persistence of Japanese popular religiosity despite Japan's high modernity. Though religious statistics emphasize the relative non-religiousness of that region (Pew Research Center 2015b), this view reflects the lack of official religious membership (Hackett et al. 2015). In addition, there are many traditional

East Asian practices that present themselves as philosophies and not religions in the Western sense (Ma and Meng 2011; Yeung 2003; Parker 2018). Indeed, popular religion in China has often been studied under a Western-oriented optic, with magic having a predominant role (Weber 1951).

In modern China, the three teachings—Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism—often interact with each other, so lived religion freely integrates them into many popular and syncretic rituals. These include devotion to the ancestors, pilgrimages, shrines, and shamans (Ma and Meng 2011; Clart 2012). Some scholars emphasize the elements of popular resistance present in such activities (Chau 2005), but that is only part of the picture, even recently. Traditional Japanese popular practices are more integrated into the experience of a great web of being, in which the land, the spirits, and human beings animated the world and the cosmos. It was not something to believe, it was just the way the cosmos was. This is why religious practices in Japan (especially Shinto) are historically not considered “religion” in the western sense (Kisala 2008). The vision of the planet as a living organism that to be cared for with affection and not exploited and plundered is close to the modern perspective on Gaia.

The Indian subcontinent’s dedication to the old Dharmic wisdom that there are many paths to God (Chandrasekharendra 2008) matches its long history of religious syncretism and its tolerance for popular manifestations of religion as opposed to the imposition of an orthodoxy from above. Southeast Asia similarly demonstrates a similar openness in both the official religions—Buddhism (Theravada and Mahayana), Islam (Sunnism and Shiism), and Christianity (Protestantism and Catholicism)—and a multitude of ‘local’ or ‘indigenous religions’ and traditional belief systems (Sofjan 2016). In Buddhism, for example, this includes a wide range of popular rituals, including the veneration of the Buddha, of other buddhas, of bodhisattvas, and of saints. Popular pilgrimages increase Buddhism’s ability to incorporate pre-existing local traditions (Khoon San 2002), as also true with New Year’s and harvest festivals (Ghosh 2004).

African religious history is marked by colonialism, and the majority of Africans are now adherents of Christianity or Islam, religions imposed from another cultural context. African people often combine traditional practices with Abrahamic elements (Pew Research Center 2010; Quainoo 2003). African traditional religions are polytheistic and tolerant. They are generally oral rather than scriptural, include belief in a supreme creator, belief in spirits, veneration of the dead, and the use of magic and traditional medicine. Ancestors appear more important on a daily basis than the supreme deity. The role of humanity is generally seen as one of harmonising nature with the supernatural (Asante and Mazana 2009).

Large numbers of Africans actively participate in Christianity or Islam yet also believe in witchcraft, evil spirits, sacrifices to ancestors, traditional religious healers, reincarnation, and other elements of traditional African religions (Pew Research Center 2010). “The gulf that exists between the secular and the sacred in the West does not appear in traditional African religion” (Asante and Mazana 2009, p. xxvii).

The Islamic world is not limited to the Arab countries of North Africa and the Middle East, it includes relevant expressions in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Given that Islam is organized in a very different way from the Christian tradition; that its principles of submission to Allah applies to all dimensions of life; and that religion and politics are very intertwined (Naso 2018), it is difficult to characterize the popular Islamic religions as we do in the cases of Christianity or Buddhism. The importance of Qur’anic, Sunna, and Sharia prescriptions means that the Muslim grassroots do not have the same ritual autonomy as we find in other universal religions. On the other hand, the lack of a theological authority and an official priesthood, plus the ambiguities of the authority of the ulama (Zaman 2009), make schools, doctrines, orders, and movements within the Uma proliferate (Hassan 2007; Possamai 2009).

Popular Islam (or “folk Islam”) is an umbrella term used to describe different forms of Islam that incorporate native folk beliefs and practices. Folk Islam has been described as the Islam of the urban poor, country people, and tribes, in contrast to orthodox or “High” Islam (Gellner 1992). Scholars agree that Sufism and Sufi concepts are often integrated into folk Islam.

But Gellner's theses have been criticized, since there is no evidence of a direct oppositional association between the Sufi orders and the Enlightened Islamic reform elites (such as the Salafi) (van Bruinessen 2009). The mistake, in our opinion, depends on the point of view. Looking at the problem through the Popular religion/Official religion typology, we could say that the orders (Tariqa), sheiks and Sufi saints, and Salafist teachers and ideologues are part of an official religion; folk practices and Sufi mysticism are closer to popular sentiment. Usually these popular religious practices involve a degree of syncretism with local or non-Islamic traditions, which is why they are considered heretical by the religious agents who guard the orthodoxies of the Qur'an, the Sunna and the Hadith (Asante and Mazana 2009). The so-called "superstitions" and devotion to the saints are forbidden by official Islam (Muyahid 2012), yet they continue to be practiced.

Popular forms of Islam have contributed to the confrontation with the West. The Arab and Islamic countries perceive globalization as an attempt to implant Western dominance and as a threat to the preservation of their religious and cultural identity. Although there are different views of globalization and of modernization processes, a large percentage of Muslims see them as an imperialistic way of cultural invasion and an attempt to destroy their heritage and religion (Masud et al. 2009). Modernization of the state, the law and the economy are seen as a way to secularise the nation and thus as a way of betraying Islam. This idea nourishes the Salafi elites and the jihadist vanguards, but it must be noted that this idea is deeply rooted among simple believers (van Bruinessen 2009, p. 135).

In short, the popular religions landscape is complex. It varies from region to region, from nation to nation, from continent to continent. Some religious expressions are closer to traditional practices, others constitute highly modern and even post-modern religious styles. In Latin America, the classical folk religion (traditional, peasant, rural, illiterate, and pre-modern) is no longer predominant, although it can be found in many African and Asian countries. Yet it is indisputable that there are many vital popular religions in the heart of the megacity, in the urban core of multiple modernities (Parker 2018).

We have personally found similarities between the popular urban religious landscapes of various megacities: Beijing, Buenos Aires, Tokyo-Yokohama, Bangkok, Cairo, Lima, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro (Barrera 2012), Mexico City (Suárez 2013), and Johannesburg (Wilhelm-Solomon et al. 2016). Van der Veer (2015) has assembled scholars' observations in various cities of Asia: Singapore, Mumbai, Karachi, Seoul, Hanoi, Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Jakarta, Bangkok, and Metro Manila. His conclusions are clear, although modernizing urban elites in these places are trying to promote secular nationalisms, the presence and revival "of some crucial aspects of religion keep its ultimate triumph at bay" (Van der Veer 2015, p. 14).

4. Multiple Modernities and Its Contradictions

Classical modernization theory argued that modernity resulted in the secularization of societies. The theory of multiple modernities allows us to criticize this theory's Eurocentric assumptions and to understand the sociohistorical, ideological and institutional contexts that have given rise to different forms of modernity in different parts of the world. These modernities have different interactions with religious systems and events, only some of which lead to religious decline. Instead, we should expect a diverse process of 'multiple secularizations' (Martin 2005; Smith and Vaidyanathan 2011). This approach argues that secularization must be understood as a complex process and not a lineal one. Globalization leaves footprints and affects its own religious evolution, so societies experiencing differing modernizing processes will have different religious paths (Oro and Steil 1997).

Therefore, secularization is better understood as a more or less radical and systemic transformation of the preceding religious field than as a gradual and inevitable decrease in the relevance and significance of the religious dimension in society. This transformation can lead, in a few cases, to an increase in non-belief or classical atheism. But on other occasions, especially in developing multiple modernities, it leads to the increase of alternative spiritualities not linked to instituted religions.

While Eisenstadt's original theory of multiple modernities has been criticized on several grounds, each of these argued for even more complexity, and thus a less uniform religious development.

Schmidt (2006), for example, argued that Eisenstadt's original theory failed to pay sufficient attention to economics. Kamali (2012) argued that although Eisenstadt considers center-periphery dynamics, he does not delve into colonial and neocolonial conflicts. In addition, we should point out that Eisenstadt does not consider inequalities and negative global flows (Ritzer and Dean 2019), nor currently increasing social conflicts (Touraine 1995, 2006). Indeed, the uneven development of capitalism with its dialectics of north/south and center/periphery, together with the hegemonic globalization, raises the resistance of local or 'glocal' identities (Castells 1998, 2012). All these dynamics affect religious evolution and its expressions in different geo-cultural areas of the contemporary world.

Consequently, and as we look at the evidence provided by Norris and Inglehart (2002, 2011) about the global religious dynamics, including the global north and the global south, we can presume that each religious/civilizational area of the planet has its own specific cultural and religious dynamics.

These facts make us realize that in reality what happens is that the specific religious evolutions depend much on the regional (or continental) history, culture and religious dynamics. Depending on the type of analysis employed, one can identify at least nine great religious/civilizational or geo-cultural areas in the world today: Western Europe; Eurasia (Central Eastern-Europe and North-Center Asia); North America; Latin America and the Caribbean; Middle East-Arabia; Indo-Asia; South-East and East Asia; Sub-Saharan Africa; Oceania. The hypothesis that these geo-cultural-religious areas of the world correspond to different processes of modernizations can be sustained—*mutatis mutandis*—in historical, cultural and statistical terms. We can presume that in each religious/civilizational area we will find specific religious field dynamics driven by the main world religious traditions historically spread through the region for centuries and the peculiar arrangements between religions and society in each case through the modernization processes from the eighteenth century onwards, including colonization and neo-colonization processes and the attempts toward decolonization in the nineteenth and twentieth century. (Parker 2016, p. 42)

Globalization has triggered many processes, including scientific-technological advances, revolutionized communications, and a new world geopolitics. New technologies of information and communication have in their turn shifted the way that people believe and express their faith. Some of these persons and groups wish to be religious outside the control of an organized religious institution. For them, the Internet has become the ideal medium for communicating religious beliefs and practices (Dawson and Cowan 2004; Possamai 2012). In this social context, syncretism, popular tradition, and religion *à la carte* are among the most common forms of religious participation.

The globalized economy produces socioeconomic inequalities (Piketty 2014) and new geopolitics. Violence remains in many peripheral societies and even in the emerging economies that have experienced rapid growth, such as Brazil, South Africa, India, China. There is also the post-Cold War multiplication of conflicts and local wars at the subnational or regional level in different parts of the world, especially in the Middle East and Africa, but also in Asia and Latin America (Cohen-Tanugi 2008). Increased waves of migrations, democratic instability, pollution, and climate change all affect the social and existential conditions of everyday life. These nurture new spiritual and faith searches. New social movements have gained the scene: feminist, sexual diversity, environmentalists, etc. Institutional crises in many churches—not just Roman Catholicism—also fuel religious change. New popular religious themes emerge: healing, gender, body and corporeality, subjectivation, materiality and spirituality, migrations, territoriality, deinstitutionalization, interculturality, cyberspace.

Berger (2014) was one of the most enthusiastic theorists in the effort to connect the revitalization of religion with multiple modernities. Reversing his previous theoretical framework (Berger 1967), which saw the 'sacred canopy' as a force for social integration and its decline as a source of secularization, Berger came to recognize the existence of multiple modernities and even of the difference between central and peripheral modernities. Yet faced with the alternatives of fundamentalism or relativism, he emphasized individual freedom in the choice of faith. This liberal approach exalted the

religious pluralism of the US, which he regarded as more successful than other societies. In contrast, [Spickard \(2017a\)](#) has shown how the religious pluralism in the USA is problematic in the face of increasing economic inequality, a socioeconomic split between the elites and the population, and shifts in the nature of the religious field.

Still, Eisenstadt's and Berger's different approaches to multiple modernities and their consequences for religion open a fruitful path to interpret what happens with popular religions in today's world. If we add to this a greater appreciation of these modernities' structural contradictions than either author provides, we can understand even more deeply the relationship between societies and their religions. In many cases, for example, popular religions can be seen as a counterculture to the modernization processes, but at the same time as a dialectical product of them. In such cases, they are part of the specific transformations and contradictory modernizations taking place in society.

5. Globalization Leaves Footprints and Affects Its Own Religious Evolution, so Societies Experiencing Differing Modernizing Processes Will Have Different Religious Paths

The reflexive turn proposed here aims to counter-balance those classical sociological theory of religious phenomenon that lack a comprehensive perspective. This involves recognizing the biases that Western sociology has brought to its analysis of religions and correcting them by the addition of non-Western approaches. Several authors are already moving in this same direction ([McGuire 2008](#); [Possamai 2009](#); [De la Torre 2013](#); [Mallimaci 2017](#); [Spickard 2017b](#)).

Religious diversity is not recent; it has existed for thousands of years, but it has not always been visible. Globalization and the concept of multiple modernities make it possible to see old and new forms of diversity. Therefore, we are not just observing the growth of the empirical and historical diversification of religious alternatives. Instead, we are initiating a new social perception, an epistemological shift in what we understand by diversity and pluralism and their role in contemporary religious transformations.

Each civilization has its own history, which shapes its way of seeing. No single civilization can give us an adequate conceptual framework for understanding the diverse socio-historical-religious experiences of all others. The classic theory of secularization that arose in Europe is as exceptional as that continent's religious history and culture ([Davie 2006](#)). It cannot be simply applied to understand what happens in Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, Arab countries, Sub-Saharan Africa, or other regions.

From this point of view, even the diverse expressions of cults, beliefs, mysticisms and spiritualities within Christian backgrounds around the world cannot simply be reduced to manifestations of 'generic' Christianity—especially as seen from a Euro-Christian-centric epistemology or theology.

Once we treat modernities as multiple, the specificity of each modernity opens up the spectrum of religious alternatives that flourish in every geo-cultural area, including non-religious alternatives. This allows us to explain, for example, that European diversity historically includes, since the emergence of the Modern State, an important segment of non-practicing believers, non-believers, and atheists. This secularizing trend has been diverted in recent decades by the migratory flows that have affected the much greater presence of Muslim believers and to a lesser extent, Asians believers on the continent.

The diverse magico-religious expressions of peoples of the world are complex phenomenon and must not be reduced to secondary forms of religions. They are social constructions that are not built, centrally, on rationalized ways of living, as the case of institutionalized Western Christianity. The rationale of social action that supports popular rituals follows another logic ([Parker 1996](#)), different from the rationalistic dominant logic of the Western pattern of modernity. That popular logic is not pre-modern. It is able to interact with modernity and not reject it, though it can sometimes resist certain oppressive or destructive forces coming from outside.

The challenge for critical social theory is to develop a way of observing popular religions that does not simply treat them as deviant forms of European religious life. Such 'orientalism'—as [Said \(1978\)](#) brilliantly exposed—is a colonialist myth. It constitutes a disdainful attitude towards other cultures and generates misunderstanding.

Developing a new comprehensive sociological approach means making a great epistemological effort to overcome the hegemony of an analytical focus that privileges Western-oriented rational action. Understanding religious and spiritual diversity in the context of multiple modernities challenges us to develop a post-rational sociology (Costa 2014). The conceptual procedure has to come from a methodology that highlights empathetic perception and understanding. Only then can we ensure that scholarly interpretations are meaningful for the informants and do not impose an external predefined model of religion upon them (Kapaló 2013).

I propose the relevance of two sociological conceptual tools that can be applied to popular religions in the Global South. For space reasons, I can only sketch this perspective here. These two key concepts are lived religion and symbolic action.

(a) Lived religion and agency

There are new forms of studying religious behavior that goes beyond the classical Western concepts associated with the word religion. An epistemological shift has been taking place since the beginning of this century. Many scholars have been focusing on actually lived religion and the religious experiences of people in their everyday lives (Ammerman 2016). Drawing on extensive, mostly qualitative fieldwork, this research has shown that the many ways in which people express themselves spiritually rarely fit neatly into the conceptual categories that have animated the classical sociological approaches to religion (McGuire 2008). Ammerman, McGuire, and others have argued that the classical concepts fail to see many parts of the religious landscape. If, instead, we look at the ways ordinary people produce and reproduce their symbolic world, we will observe that religion is in very good health—even in supposedly secular contexts.

Most of these scholarly interventions focus on the lived religions of the Global North. They thus focus on religious individualism—or at least on individual manifestations of religions that occur in local congregational contexts (Ammerman 2016). This is not the pattern that lived religion takes in Asia, Latin America and Africa. There, the religions that people produce in my own way or *à la carte* are generated by agents whose cultural and spiritual background is communitarian rather than individualistic. The family devotions, and even personal ones, of the Chinese people, Hindus, Africans, the Muslim people, or Latin American peoples, are generated by cultural patterns that emphasize parental and community relationships: ancestors, lineages, relatives, neighborhoods, and/local communities. These patterns are reproduced as new generations re-invent old traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). These new generations often are already immersed in modern and mercantile economies, and their embedded utilitarian and instrumental logics. Yet these logics coexist with older symbolic logics that shape both people's meanings and their ability to cope with daily life and its constraints. Anguish and problems on the one hand, and claims of meaning and identity on the other, produce lives where mere instrumental reason no longer appear as effective.

(b) Symbolic action and its rationality

In his definition of religion as a cultural system, Clifford Geertz shows that the characteristic of religion and what makes it different from other spheres is not beliefs but religious action (Geertz 1973, p. 112). This action can be practical—it can have technical or political functions—but it can also be symbolic. The latter confers meaning, delivers identity, and stimulates our fabulative, magical, mystical, and contemplative imagination. Though every religious action has a technical or socio-political side, its symbolic side is free from such instrumentality: it simply makes sense. Under many religious expressions—mainly ethnic and/or popular—the symbolic is linked to energy and not to social or political power. Certainly, the symbolic side of religious action grants a cosmic and supernatural rather than a socio-political meaning.

Eurocentric sociology encounters a problem, here, in its distinction between “religion” and “magic”. Too often, sociologists use this distinction to separate the symbolic from the practical,

assigning the first to an elite intelligentsia and the second to the non-elite poor. The latter's religion is treated as being infused with superstitious or "magical" thinking. As [Mauss \(1985\)](#) recognizes, the term "magic" has the connotation of a second-order religious action, a deformed ritual action. On the contrary, all religious action has both elements. There is typically a continuum between the "magical" and the "religious dimensions". [Weber \(1971\)](#) himself made this clear in his study of the communal dimensions of religious phenomena: that even in the most official ritual actions of churches there are magical features.

The evolutionary distinctions between magic, religion, and science in Western thought is typical of elites in all ages, whether theologians, philosophers, or scientists. As [Tambiah \(1991\)](#) suggests, a reaction, as a popular counterculture to the Enlightenment, was precisely paganism and folk magic.

Therefore, we suggest moving away from a concept of magic that is loaded with Eurocentric connotations and that only conceives of what is rightly religious according to the rationalizing and intellectualist Judeo-Christianity tradition or its secularized offspring. On the contrary, we find a conception of the magic-religious rite—a continuum—to be more appropriate for understanding the varied expressions of popular religions in non-Western settings. These religions are not elite and do not necessarily favor a Western-style rationality.

6. Popular Religions and Multiple Modernities: Prospects

The religious diversity of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, is part of a process leading towards a specific type of modernity in each case. Each modernity establishes patterns that generate incentives for religious growth or impose limits on the foreseeable increase in religious alternatives. The theory of multiple modernities implies that the modernization processes is not a process of lineal evolution and that even secularization follows different paths. Vigorous popular religions in different parts of the world configure, alongside other factors, different modernizing paths.

In some places popular religion takes the form of the syncretic New Age practices that are more popular than traditional churches, even competing with the neo-Pentecostal and Evangelical options that elsewhere dominate the popular sphere ([Possamai 2012](#)). In other places, more traditional popular cults attract millions, especially within the emerging economies of most urban and modern Global South countries. The invigorating of the many and sundry popular expressions of different faiths are part of the multiple modernization processes and not exotic expressions of a backward religiosity.

According to available data ([Johnson and Zurlo 2015](#)), Christianity has expanded rapidly in sub-Saharan Africa, though its prospects are much less promising in the Sino-Japanese area. The Muslim dominance of the Middle East and of North of Africa leaves room for the multiplication of schools and traditions within the Umma, but not much space for Christian or Dharmic alternatives (Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Buddhism). On the Indian subcontinent, Dharmic religions endure, Islam is probably increasing, but Christian prospects are dim. In Latin America, most popular religions are Christian-based, while Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism are not likely to see growth in the next fifty years.

The popular reconstruction of religions, magic, and spirituality in current Latin American, Asian, African, and Middle East societies no longer necessarily passes through churches, ulemas, monks, priests, and official religious institutions, although it still needs them as positive or negative references. Notwithstanding, the old official religions seek to survive by reaffirming their communal and institutional projects, especially in the Christian and Islamic areas. Sometimes, they affirm their orthodoxies and become fundamentalists; other times, their missionary or reformist vocation is highlighted.

But certainly, lived religions ([Ammerman 2016](#); [McGuire 2008](#)) and the multiple expressions of popular religions that we have analyzed, no longer need the irreplaceable mediation of those official institutions (ecclesiastical or not). Still, there are latent short circuits in the attraction/rejection dynamic between the official institutions and their faithful.

In this context, tradition and change evolves in constant tension. The transformation of symbolic codes, in the midst of the accelerated flow of information (Ritzer and Dean 2019), which is powered by new information and communication technologies, generates spaces and forms of socialization never before known. It re-signifies the lives of subjects, but also adds uncertainty to their existence. Different forms of faith and spirituality are swirled into this dynamic milieu.

A new sociology of religion is emerging within the framework of a post-rationalist paradigm (Costa 2014). It seeks to better comprehend popular religions' symbolic and semiological codes rather than merely analyzing the cognitive and linguistic codes of popular religious expressions. Our insistence on advancing in a non-western-centric approach to popular religions worldwide has nothing to do with an anti-Western vision but with the need to contextualize our theoretical frameworks and overcome that false identification between Western theorization and universal theorization.

A more detailed and documented analysis that follows the directions outlined in this article could open unexpected new vistas towards understanding popular religious phenomena that demands much more research that they have received heretofore. We need these new approaches to comprehend the religious and cultural transformations that await us in this century.

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