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Magic and Religion: Toward a Hermeneutic of Popular Religiosity

INTRODUCTION

The scene is not unfamiliar to many large capitals of the world on market day. The narrow lanes are overflowing with fresh fruit, produce, and hand crafts. Trucks laden with imported goods from around the world are being unloaded, and these goods too are exhibited in the outdoor stalls. The languages vary, as do the songs. Strains of Islamic chant mix with African drums and Andean wood pipes. The smells mix as well. These include the odor of rotting produce crushed under foot by a steady traffic of buyers, tourists and vendors. Richer smells can also be detected: cut flowers and herbs, pungent cheeses and fresh fish. Cooked foods are available from walking vendors and well-established shops with long lines of hungry patrons. The sounds of hissing oil, percolating coffee, and bubbling concoctions that promise health as well as to satisfy one's hunger float over it all. And finally, as the capstone, there is the dominant aroma of burning incense—a sweet-smelling copal from the mountains of Central America.

Strolling through this bedlam of languages and assorted accents are representatives of the state: police to maintain order, tax collectors to guarantee that all of the vendors have paid their fees and *baksheesh*.

At the edge of the market, in a quieter place set apart from the bustle of vendors and the press of the crowd, are two small tables laid over with brightly covered cloths and various crystals, hexagons and cards painted with signs from Jewish cabalism, Hindu mandelas, and drawings of the zodiac. Behind one table sits a woman reading the palm of an anxious client. They speak in hushed tones but the woman doing the "reading" is overheard encouraging her client to "risk moving the crystal through the next passage" depicted in the maze woven into her tablecloth. Across the small plaza, a second reader is promising happy results to her client if he throws a certain talisman into the river.

The river in this case is the Potomac and the place is Washington's Eastern Market. This is where Congress's young staff members, Capital Hill lobbyists, and assorted professionals purchase their produce on Saturday mornings and, while waiting for the fresh fish to arrive from the Chesapeake, receive enlightenment with the help of the market's resident shamans, witches, and fortune tellers.

Despite rumors to the contrary, secular America has not quite buried its belief in the supernatural. Devotions of various sorts are flourishing. Some reflect the private, individualistic character of American culture. Like Eastern Market's soothsayers, these devotions are private affairs—between believer and the “life-force” with the aid of a soothsayer that one visits only when necessary. During my walk through Eastern Market, I found myself smiling at the men and women waiting to consult the fortunetellers. Then I paused to reflect on my own experience as a priest and religious. How would these men and women waiting to see a soothsayer regard the Catholic Eucharist or my community's sponsorship of the visit of the relics of St. Thérèse of Lisieux to Washington? This Saturday stroll through Eastern Market brought me home—in a literal and figurative sense—to reexamine some of anthropology's insights on religion and magic; to look again at my experience as a priest and religious, as much involved with sacramentals as with sacraments.

THE RULES OF MAGIC ARE DISTINCT FROM THOSE OF RELIGION

In 1925 Bronislaw Malinowski published the monograph *Science, Religion and Reality* in which he distinguished magic from religion. Magic, he wrote, is “the practical art consisting of acts which are only means to a definite end. . . . (It has a) limited, circumscribed technique: spell, rite, and the condition of the performer. . . . It is always the affirmation of man's power to cause certain definite effects by a definite spell and rite.” Religion, according to Malinowski, is “a body of self-contained acts being themselves the fulfillment of their purpose. Unlike magic, religion does not depend on technique and its integrity does not depend on function, but rather in the value of belief” (1954:69).

Because the practice of magic and religion includes the speaking of words in some essential ways, I have expanded here on Malinowski's distinction between these phenomena by considering the rules that govern their practice as speech events. I then look at a speech event—the invocation of a blessing in the presence of a relic—and propose a methodology for considering the varieties of popular religiosity.

My methodology is the ethnography of speaking, the study of not just what is said, but the whole speech event—the context and rules of performance. Methodologically the ethnography of speaking is derived from linguistics and anthropology and has its starting point in Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* delivered at the University of Geneva between 1906–1911. In these lectures de Saussure distinguished language from speech.

According to de Saussure, speech is the use of language. Language sets the boundaries for speech, but within these boundaries speakers exercise a great deal of latitude in using words and grammar. Nobody speaks a

language as it is defined by the rules. There exist rules of use that exist within the rules of language. Speakers rely on gesture, objects in the context of the speech event, interruptions, expectations based on past performances, and rules that define the nature of the overall speech event.

John Searle characterizes the two kinds of rules that govern a speech event as *regulative* or *constitutive* (1969:33–42). According to Searle, regulative rules govern independently existing forms of behavior. He cites the rules of etiquette as an example. These regulate the accepted forms of behavior between persons, but they do not create a relationship. The relationship exists independently of the rules. Constitutive rules, on the other hand, create the activities they also describe. For example, the rules of chess create the game of chess.

Most often speech describes a state of being and is either true or false. But there are certain kinds of utterances that do something. These speech acts are neither true nor false; they perform certain acts. Examples from ordinary language include “I thank you” and “I bet you five dollars.”

Shamanistic utterances are normally in the form of speech acts whose rules are predominantly constitutive. The rules of religious language are regulative and depend upon pre-existing faith and integrity between what is said and done. This distinction helps us see the difference between magic and religion.

Magic is a means to an end, a practical art that includes uttering certain words in certain circumstances, correctly and completely, and that does not emphasize the integrity between what is said and what is done. Magic must be performed correctly because it is an activity constituted by its rules. The cause is the doer who speaks these words in specific circumstances. The saying of magical words thus affirms man’s power to cause certain definite effects by a definite spell and rite.

Religion is not a means to an end; it is the end itself. Religion does not depend on technique but rather on a pre-existing faith and the value of belief. Religious rules are regulative of that belief; they do not constitute it. Speech acts emphasize how well words describe the authentic feelings of the community of believers. In the categories for the successful completion of a speech act, religion places greatest emphasis on the consistency between what is felt, said and done. The words both do and describe.

Magical training does not include theology. The shaman’s apprenticeship is spent learning the correct practice of rituals, chants, and spells. These practices reflect a general worldview—a theory of the person, a cosmology and a morality—but they are principally concerned with results. Mature shamans who have had time and experience to refine their craft may turn to theology in their old age. But more often than not, their audience is the anthropologist or ethnologist. This is so because shamans are valued in their own societies, not for what they

illuminate about the interior life or one's relationship with God, but for what they accomplish for their clients.

Religious practitioners invoke reason to attack shamanism, arguing that it does not accomplish what it claims. But magic does not depend on the success of its practice. When one invests heavily in a belief tied to a practice that is supposed to produce certain effects (such as exact knowledge of future events) and the prophecy fails, people are more likely to blame the mis-execution or mis-invocation of the practice than to discard the belief. In situations involving magic, people simply hold the practice to have been mis-executed.

Religious speech events are regulative of the collective faith of a people. Religion does not create faith; it expresses it. Religion requires a theology to reflect on the relationship of the divine to human experience. Theologians serve religion by clarifying the structural connections within a belief system and between belief and practices. In most societies, theologians make these connections through myth making. But theology is more than myth making. Its methodology includes clarifying commonly held beliefs about the nature of the human person, cosmology and the divine. Theology is not a uniquely western field. Various studies of the belief systems of "primitive" peoples indicate how religion presumes a theology and how different societies reflect on their relationship with a divine being and integrate these beliefs with how they live (Brown, 1922; Evans-Prichard, 1974 ; Radin, 1937; Nadel, 1954).

But in drawing the distinction we ought not presume religion is entirely devoid of shamanistic practices. Some religious speech events, for example, stress correct execution over interiority and focus on the practitioner as the source of power. In a similar vein, some shamanistic practices evidence a common faith. The case presented below—concerning relics—shows this blending of religious practice and shamanism. Before describing this case, however, it is necessary to distinguish three levels of interpretation: the exegetical, the operational and the structural (Turner, 1967). The exegetical level of interpretation is what the natives say something means. The operational level is how the ritual object, rite, or symbol is actually used in a society. The structural level of meaning is how this particular practice relates to the overall cultural system.

THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX COMES TO AMERICA

Relics are part of the popular religiosity of Roman Catholicism and often exhibit the dual properties of sacramental and magic talisman. This dual propensity is evident in the current tour of the relics of Thérèse of Lisieux being made throughout the United States. Thérèse was a middle-class French girl born on January 2, 1873, the ninth and last child of Zélie and Louis Martin. She entered the Carmelite convent

at Lisieux on April 9th 1888. After a painful infirmity, she died on September 30, 1897 at age 24. During her time in the Carmel of Lisieux Thérèse wrote a spiritual autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*. This work has been translated into sixty languages and became an instant success. Her message has had special appeal for her time and in 1925 Thérèse was canonized by Pope Pius XI. In 1997 Pope John Paul II declared St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Doctor of the Church.

As I write this essay an unspecified quantity of primary relics of Thérèse of Lisieux are making a pilgrimage around the United States, having already completed similar visits throughout France, most of western Europe, Russia, Brazil, and Argentina. From the United States the relics travel to Australia, Philippines, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Italy, Mexico, Ireland, and Lebanon. Not even the organizers from the five provincial communities of Discalced and Ancient Observance Carmelites know what the reliquary actually contains. The mystery has only contributed to the attraction of the visit.

The reliquary is an elaborately designed, wood coffer shaped like a basilica, decorated with gold-leaf filigree. The coffer sits on a wood paladin covered by a plexiglas hood. Together the relics, reliquary, and carrying case weigh 300 lbs. and require eight adults to carry it.

The North American tour of Thérèse's relics is costly—the initial investment of the five Carmelite provinces was \$100,000. The relics are being transported from one destination to another in a van. Sites for the visit include Carmelite convents, monasteries, parishes, and other places where the Carmelites serve as well as many major cathedrals in the United States.

The form of venerating the relics will vary from place to place, but there is an underlying, official style to these events that serves to interpret the relics meaning in a way that clearly place these activities within the world of religion. The observations that follow are taken from the first days of the visit to Washington and Baltimore.

In both cities the relics were placed in diminutive positions relative to the altar and pulpit. The preaching emphasized the position of canonized saints in the communion of saints that includes all believers. Both operationally and structurally the reliquary was interpreted by the organizers as part of a complex of religious culture that depended entirely on the faith of the Church. Two homilists spoke about the human need to communicate values, ideas, and structural relationships through the senses—hence the interest in and attraction to the relics. Most of the preaching elaborated on themes that were familiar to the saint: her acceptance of God's will, her generosity of spirit, and most importantly, her "little way to perfection" based on her ministry to love.

Neither the organizers nor the rector of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington—the first major exposition of

the relics—anticipated the huge response on the part of the Catholic community of Washington to the event. The monasteries where the relics were venerated could not control the flow of visitors. Nor could the organizers control the exegetical understanding of the saint's visit to the United States.

The visitors were mixed and varied in age, gender, ethnicity, race, apparent economic status, and even religious backgrounds. Washington has a large immigrant population, and many Asians were present at the events, with smaller numbers of Latin Americans. Not content simply to sit in the presence of the reliquary and pray, these devotees of the saint insisted on touching the plexiglas cover, sometimes kissing, sometimes placing their tear-stained faces against its smooth, curved surface. At Whitefriars Hall in Washington, D.C., the Little Flower Society had made available holy cards with a drawing of the United States drawn by Thérèse in her convent in Lisieux. These were pressed against the plexiglas accompanied by prayers of intercession offered on behalf of some cause.

The behavior of the faithful needs to be considered in the context of the whole speech event of her blessing. The coffer arrived at the monasteries to be greeted by lines of white-cloaked Carmelites singing *Salve Regina*. Unaccustomed to the correct protocol for carrying a saint's relics, the seminarians assumed the funereal gazes of professional mourners. The reliquary was carried in silent procession into the chapel and placed on a slightly elevated platform draped with red velvet. The seating around the coffer allowed for ninety persons to view the relics while lines formed to permit ten to twelve "viewers" to kneel before the reliquary, to pray and to physically touch the plexiglas. Meanwhile the white cloaked Carmelites provided what can best be described as a careful vigilance over the saint's remains.

The veneration was limited to five hours and lines formed around the Carmelite property as the faithful waited to enter. Waiting in the October chill did not prove too inconvenient until the possibility arose that the doors were about to close as midnight approached. Tensions rose and the seminarians were pressured to let the crowds inside.

One conversation between a seminarian and a man who had arrived late for the viewing is worth noting. He mentioned that he had heard that the viewing was to last all night so he had come late to avoid the crowds. The seminarian tried to reason with him: "If you don't get in, St. Thérèse certainly knows of the effort you made to get here and will be appreciative." The man responded "You just don't get it, do you? I have to get inside. I have a special favor to ask, and I need the help of the Little Flower."

In fact, the seminarian did not "get it." This man needed to touch the coffer or some physical material close to the coffer. The proximity of the

pavement outside the monastery was not close enough. His faith was strong, but his need for the assurance that magic portends was stronger still. He needed to say his prayers in close proximity and in physical contact with the saint's remains. In this way, his prayers were not subject to the doubt of faith. Rather, his prayer would be presented within the magical orbit of the saint's relics.

MAGIC AND MARGINALIZATION

Some anthropologists have accounted for the difference between magic and religion in terms of the social status of the practitioners. To Joseph Campbell, magic attracts the marginal and disaffected of a society, while religion attracts the social mainstream. Campbell's characterization appears valid. To a certain degree practitioners of New Age Alchemy are persons dissatisfied with their experience of mainstream religions, especially Christianity and Judaism. Yet they experience a yearning for a spiritual experience that secular life cannot offer them. In many respects shamanism is compatible with modern American culture. It focuses on the individual; it is private; it is auto-therapeutic, emphasizing personal power and responsibility. What these practitioners of New Age Alchemy want is ritual without theology, or as Susan Sontag has written, piety without content.

Shamanistic practice flourishes among marginalized youth. His fellow students in Pearl, Mississippi have variously described Luke Woodham as "weird," "friendly," and "quiet," "lonely," and "on the edge." Woodham accounted for the murder of his family and former girlfriend as vengeance against the world for having made him suffer throughout life. "No one ever truly loved me," Woodham has said. "No one ever really cared about me." Young men like Luke Woodham can reverse these feelings of inferiority and loneliness through shamanism. They make the rules. They follow the rules. Others suffer, if not immediately, then eventually, as a result of their successful completion of these rules. And the rules are not tied to a deeper faith and anthropology. They constitute the magical event.

It will not be surprising if Woodham's lawyers enter a plea for mental impairment. More interesting will be the prosecution's case against Grant Boyette, alleged leader of Woodham's small cult. At the time of this writing, Boyette has also been charged with murder. But how did Boyette participate in murder? According to the prosecution, it was through Satanic practice that Boyette gained control over Woodham's willpower and forced him to kill.

Prison chaplains report huge interest in shamanistic cult and Catholic sacramentals in American jails and prisons. This is consistent with the general belief that religion is the spiritual practice of those in power while magic belongs to the poor and marginalized. But this observa-

tion does not account for the plethora of magico-sacramental practices in the prison population.

Prisoners who practice shamanism or act as clients of shamanistic practice protect themselves from power directed against them by other shamans or witches. But in protecting themselves, they also absolve themselves for the crimes they have committed. "I did it, but it wasn't really my fault, because someone put bad (power) against me." Shamanism offers power to the powerless. With its emphasis on practice over theology, there is no need for long and costly study. The shaman, once he or she has learned the cult, is in charge and is not dependent on God or Satan for power.

Shamanism is syncretistic. One does not hear concerns expressed for the purity of shamanistic rite. Quite the contrary, shamanism draws power from a variety of traditions. Thus, chaplains who respond to the requests of inmates for rosaries, scapulars, holy cards and other sacramentals, often contribute to the alleged power of these objects to the syncretistic complex created by the inmate-shaman.

It is not only the socially marginal, however, who are attracted to magic. It also attracts mainstream members of society who feel marginalized by lack of good fortune, a lack of control over their lives, their emotional state and the lives of those around them. Through magic—for example, the touching of St. Thérèse's reliquary—the devotee restores a sense of control over one's fortune.

CONCLUSION

Sociologists of religion like Robert Bellah have made much of the Puritan roots of American culture. American Puritanism emphasized voluntary association in the Church, the equality of all the believers and an anti-elitist priesthood. Consequently the Puritans rejected all esoteric forms of knowledge. Simply put: shamanism was undemocratic. The Puritans also emphasized the primacy of sign over symbol. Catholics, who provided the foil to Puritanism, emphasized the efficacy of symbols. Because of their characteristic "open ended" nature, symbols do not just refer to a signifier; they suggest undisclosed and future meanings. To the Catholic, symbols have the ability to do something, especially when their religious power is unlocked by speaking certain words. The Puritan reformers wanted to cast out symbols in favor of signs—where the relationship of signifier to signified exhausts all meanings.

The Puritan claimed that Catholic ritual was rooted in Satanism insofar as it was based on false claims, namely the power of the priest to say certain things in certain circumstances and transform bread into flesh, wine into blood. The Puritans also attacked sacramentals. Sacraments and sacramentals were said to be ungodly, not because they had

ungodly power, but because their claim to power was false. The eruption of witchcraft at Salem Township threatened this Puritan world-view. But more threatening to Puritan world-view was the response of the Puritans themselves to the events at Salem. Rather than dismiss the accusing children as liars and the witches as falsifiers, the Puritan judges admitted the real power of shamanism and moved to suppress it. Salem and America were left in a quandary that has not been resolved to this day: in the heart of iconoclastic New England, its most vocal opponents affirmed shamanism.

How should we confront witchcraft? Surely not the way of Salem's Puritans, and by that I do not mean just the execution of witches. Rallying communities against Halloween, forbidding schools to hang paper witches on the bulletin board, and paying excessive attention to the jewelry of rock musicians is neither appropriate nor an adequate response to this problem. The days are gone when the Congregational minister can call up the judge from Boston to rout out the witch. But the power of witchcraft to manipulate the weak and marginal members of society still remains. Before acting, pastors, parents, teachers, and chaplains need to better understand the phenomenon of shamanism as distinct from religion.

Who is the shaman and why do they practice? These men and women claim the power, without reference to a shared communal belief, by saying certain things, in the context of certain acts, to be able to induce young men like Luke Woodham to kill.

With reference to some cultural groups, Federal Law now supports shamanistic practice. American Indians have the right of access to materials that are shamanistic and the right to practice—within prison walls—shamanistic rites and sacrifice. The irony is that the practice of "Santeria" is illegal in Miami and if practitioners persist in its practice, they will be arrested. But once in prison, federal guidelines guarantee Cuban prisoners the right to practice Santeria.

Nor is seeing a satanic threat in every symbol a way to combat shamanism. A few years ago *The Washington Post* (Salmon, 1997) reported a case where a Baptist church in Virginia Beach, Va., destroyed a cross and memorial garden dedicated to a deceased Sunday school teacher. The pastor ordered this because the cross had become entwined with roses, thus making it a satanic symbol. The pastor and his assistants destroyed the cross, cut down all of the plants, upturned the paving stones and then, in an act that defies the imagination, they sprinkled the barren ground with holy water. Aside from the question, where do Baptists get holy water, how could this pastor have imagined that his act would undermine belief in shamanism in his small community?

So how should Christians confront shamanism? There are quite a few small lessons to be learned and one comprehensive solution.

We should be careful to criticize the religious practices of others. Because a religious practice is exotic, does not mean that it is shamanistic. Many Native American, Central American and African practices that appear to be shamanistic are in fact religious practices whose meaning is only evident within the whole complex of indigenous faith and culture. We should discourage extracting prayers and practices of other faiths from outside their cultural context for use in Christian ceremonies. The removal of a religious practice from one culture to be practiced in another often relegates the faith of the stranger to shamanism.

Special care should be taken when sacramentals are involved in ministry to extremely marginal groups, such as mentally ill patients, prisoners, and the very poor. Who would not respond when a prisoner asks for a rosary? But the giving of this gift requires special catechesis. Finally, the most important pastoral response to shamanism: attempt to understand the need of the practitioner and respond to that need. This requires, at times, crossing the threshold of belief in order to better understand the other, and opening the door to deeper truths shared by the larger community.

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