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## Popular Religion as Oppression and Liberation: Hypotheses on its Past and Present in Latin America

THIS ESSAY is divided into five parts. First, I will discuss a particular theoretical approach to what '*popular* religion' is in Latin America. Second, I will investigate the historical development of the phenomenon. Third, I will offer a structural description of popular religion. Fourth, I will describe, in very general terms, the elements of this form of religion. Finally I will consider what is perhaps the most characteristic aspect of this religion, the whole area of its political significance, both from the point of view of its political manipulation and from that of its genuine potential for liberation.

### 1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The Cuban Academy of Sciences recently established a department of sociology of religion. Last year I had discussions with its members on the theme 'Popular Religion in Cuba'. The subject is thus of interest in the most diverse areas of Latin American life.

#### (a) Popular culture

The phenomenon of 'popular religion' must be seen in the context of 'popular culture' in Latin America. By 'culture' I do not mean a level of the superstructure or an ideological level which is merely a 'reflection' of the

infrastructure. Quite the contrary, 'culture' denotes a system of practical acts (beginning with those connected with production, the economy, etc.) which determine individual or social subjectivity, through labour and its products, through the relations of production themselves and through the existential meaning they have for subjectivity.

Culture is the totality of objects (material culture), with the world as a totality of meaning (intellectual culture) of which subjects (individuals, groups, classes, sectors of society, etc.) are the bearers. There is therefore a diversity of cultures, confrontation between them and domination of one culture over another. Cultures differ in extent; they may cover a class, a nation, a group of nations such as Latin America or a period of world history.

'Popular culture' is a specific culture,<sup>1</sup> and the popular culture of Latin America has its own quite specific stamp. If the 'people' is not the nation as a whole (this is the populist definition, which includes national bourgeoisies, as in Nazism, Fascism, Peronism, *cardenismo*, etc.), but the 'social bloc' of the oppressed, this means that the people includes the oppressed classes of the capitalist system (peasants and waged workers), and in addition tribes, ethnic groups, unemployed marginal groups and other oppressed social sectors, particularly in the outlying, dependent and under-developed nations of the capitalist world system. *Popular* culture is thus different from transnational or imperial culture, from the national culture, from the culture of the ruling classes, and even from 'mass' culture.<sup>3</sup>

### (b) Popular religion in Latin America

The people's 'religion', especially in Latin America, is an element of popular culture. It is the *fundamental core of meaning* of popular culture as a whole, since in it practices are performed which define the deepest meaning of existence. The daily life of the suffering people of Latin America draws the meaning of life, work, marriage, the family, suffering and death, not from the State education system, not from the culture of the mass media, and not even from particular left-wing parties. It is the prerogative of popular religion to give meaning to all these areas.

At the same time this religion constitutes a core area of the people which is not distorted or counterfeit. It does so, on the one hand, because the nineteenth century liberal State was anti-popular, totally ignored the people and so enabled them to become the protagonists of their own religion. This is also true in the religious sphere, because the 'Romanisation' of Catholic Church in the second half of the nineteenth century distanced the Church too, in its official practices, from those practices in which the people themselves



were the active subject. In other words, popular religion remained under the control of the people themselves: in the family, in the village, in the neighbourhood, in the lay confraternities, among the *rezadores*, community leaders, *mayordomos*, or simply in the faith of the people, over which official religion had no control, since it knew nothing of it.

This relation to actions, that is, the fact that people are in control of their activity and understand its structure, is what makes popular religion a privileged 'field' in which the people can assert their own interests, even if this process frequently remains merely symbolic.

In conclusion, then, we can say that popular religion consists of subjective popular beliefs, symbols and rites, of forms of behaviour and practices which have objective meaning, which are the product of a centuries-old history and should not be confused with the official clerical religion. It is a 'religious field' on its own, with relative autonomy, in which the people are the subject, even though priests, shamans and prophets also exercise influence.

## 2. HISTORICAL ORIGIN

Popular religion in Latin America is the result of a centuries-old historical process which has at least three main components.

### (a) The beginning

#### (i) *Hispanic and Lusitanian popular religion*<sup>4</sup>

With the accession of Constantine the Roman empire became Christendom, and in the process Christianity became identified with the dominant culture. In addition, the Latin liturgy of Rome (one among many others) was despotically imposed on the mass of Christians. The combination of the establishment of the Roman liturgy as official and the development of the Christian community into a mass phenomenon, inevitably gave rise to feudal popular religion at the heart of medieval Christianity. This process occurred in the Roman imperial province of Hispania, which was ruled by the West Goths and was converted to Christianity in the sixth century. Hispanic 'popular religion' consisted of a whole bundle of tenets and practices, a mixture of the religious traditions of the Iberians and the Romans, those of the early Christians and the West Goths. As a result of the Moslem invasions it reached a new flowering in the Christian Arab structure. The apostle James cannot be understood unless he is seen as an anti-Mohammed in the reconquest of Spain from the Moors. Many popular religious traditions in

Latin America go back to Hispanic and Lusitanian, medieval and West Gothic origins.

*(ii) Indian religion<sup>5</sup>*

To a greater or lesser extent, according to the degree of contemporary presence of Indian culture, such as existed in Mexico and Central America, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, Latin American popular religion also derives from the traditions of the original inhabitants of the continent. Just as the Christianity of the Mediterranean region was superimposed on Greco-Roman religion (for example, Christmas derives from a pagan festival), and German Christianity on the religion of the original inhabitants (their trees and strikingly shaped rocks led to the development of symbolic religious elements, medieval places of pilgrimage and procession, out of pre-Christian altars and shrines), so the ancient beliefs and practices of the Caribbean Indians, the Aztecs, the Mayas, Chibchas or Incas, to mention only a few, are the soil on which Latin American religion has grown.

*(iii) African religion*

Because of their importance in the Caribbean, Central America, Brazil and Colombia, African religions must also be included among the constitutive elements of Latin American popular religion. The *orishas* express themselves in dances, and populate the everyday life of the Afro-American population of Latin America.

**(b) The religion of Christendom in Latin America<sup>6</sup>**

The violent clash at the conquest makes the presence of Christianity in Latin America deeply ambiguous. Nonetheless the quiet and often heroic work of thousands of Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, Mercedarians and others resulted in an original and creative acceptance of the Gospel by the oppressed Indian people, mestizos, black slaves and impoverished Spaniards. This *people* developed, for itself, often in opposition to the dominant culture and even to the official Church, a *world* of religion, a system of beliefs and practices which gave meaning to the totality of daily life, work, struggles, pain, death, life after death, and so on. It was a Christian, but at the same time a Latin American, world. It was a world of its own, often unknown to the dominant classes, the dominant culture and religion and even those interested in it, a world which the intellectuals and the left-wing parties until recently despised, which the liberals ignored and the conservatives manipulated. This



product of many centuries of popular life is today a fruitful field in which the old world which is passing away and the new one which is struggling to assert itself are locked in a life-and-death struggle.

**(c) The period of development (nineteenth and twentieth centuries)**

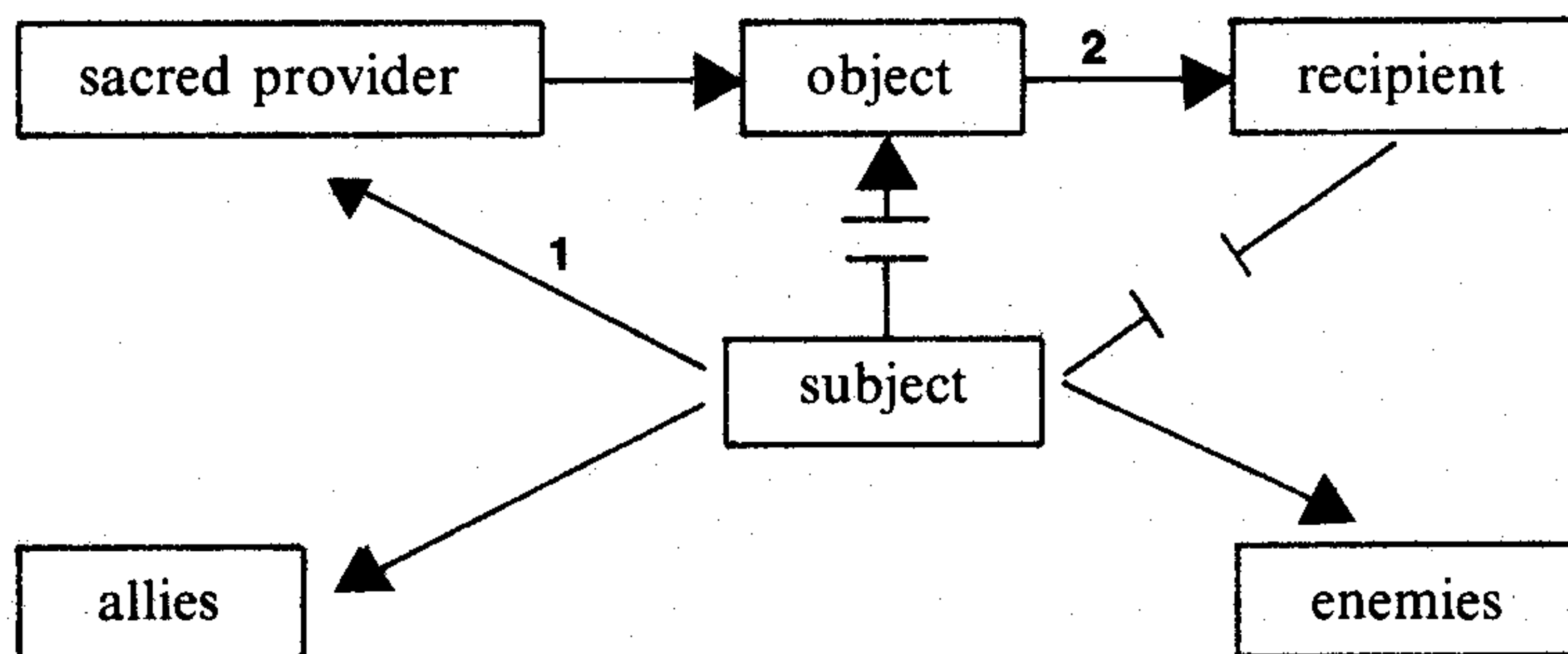
With the process of emancipation from Spain and Portugal popular religion became detached from the institutional Church and was transformed into an area of popular resistance to liberal rule, which was not only hostile to the conservatives, but also hostile to the people.

### 3. ESSENTIAL STRUCTURE

There is a form of populism which tends to turn everything to do with the people into a fetish without seeing that, as a result of the alienated oppression under which it lives, the people have incorporated their enemy and tyrant into their own religious structures. The people themselves transmit their own oppression from generation to generation in their tradition. Because of this, sharp and fundamental distinctions must be made.

**(a) Popular religion as oppression**

To analyse the negative, alienating aspects the following structure is helpful. It is based on the description given by Gilberto Gimenez, using the categories of linguistics,<sup>7</sup> specifically the 'actors' model of Propp or Greimas.<sup>8</sup>



Since the Christian people (the subject), in its state of oppression, poverty and exploitation, cannot attain to the goods necessary for everyday life (the object), health, food, work, housing, education, good harvests, safe travel, etc., it transfers responsibility for these goods to the Lord, the saint, the deity

(the sacred provider), who bestows the desired object through miracles or special gifts. In this way the subject is active in worship (arrow 1), but a passive recipient of the gifts (arrow 2).

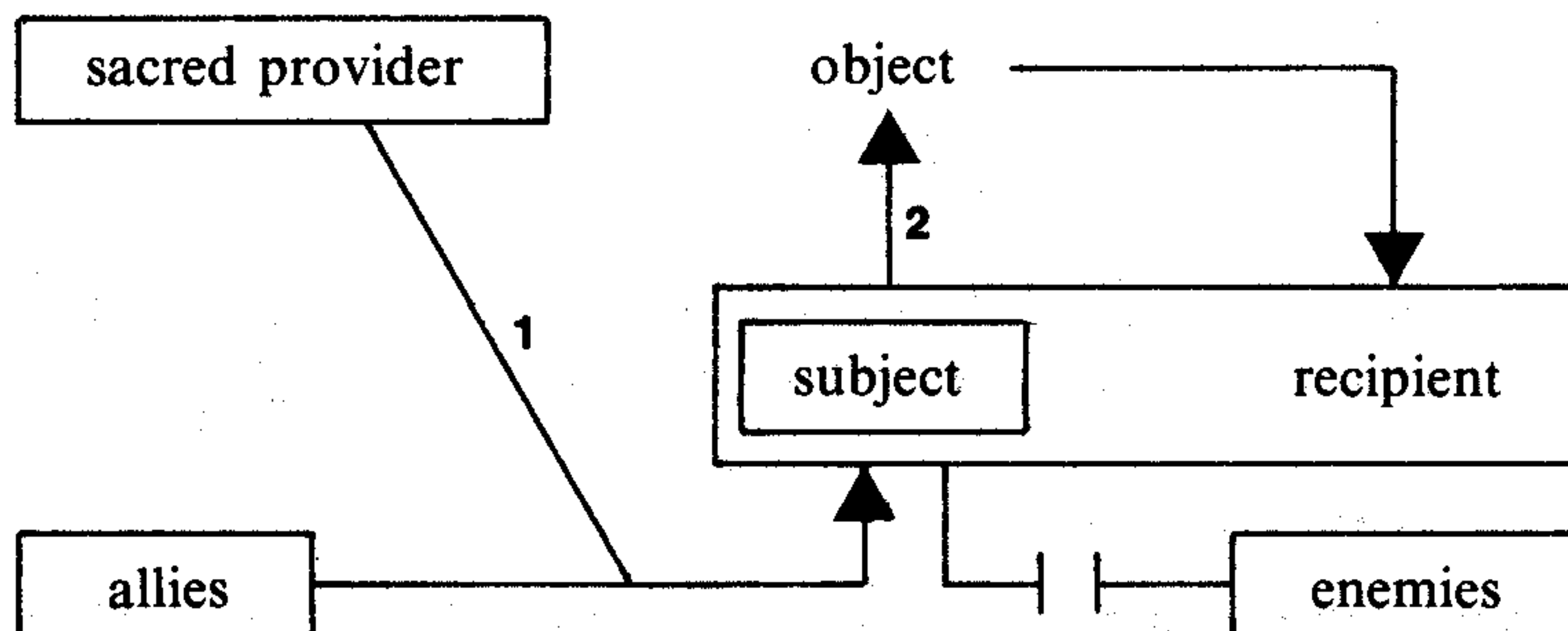
In this way the daily life of the dominated and oppressed people takes place in an 'other world' beyond the secular everyday. In reality everything is holy. Every action is governed by rules: the way of eating, the way of greeting, prayers, domestic worship, the sanctuaries of the saints, lighting candles. One has to win the sympathy of the 'allies' (the saints, the 'souls in purgatory', etc.); and one must defend oneself against the enemies (the devil, curses, etc.). The religious dimension permeates the whole of life; the 'actors' are numerous and demanding. In the country, in the villages, in the poor quarters of the towns, everywhere people live in a sort of 'mythical space'. Life suffocates in transcendence. It is a perfectly controlled system.

Belief in the survival of the soul after death, for example, is a central element in popular religion. All the fears of rural people feed on this. Apparitions, ghosts, the cries and rustling of souls in the night make it necessary to practice soothsaying, displaying a knife handle as a cross and crossing oneself with growing devotion. Popular theology, with its angels and devils, with its spirits of nature and the other world, with its souls in purgatory, forms the main substance of our legends and myths.<sup>9</sup>

### (b) Popular religion as liberation

However, the field of popular religion is not totally in the hands of shamans; it also has room for prophets. It is a field of conflict, and for that reason can serve the interests of the dominated classes, in other words, liberation.<sup>10</sup>

In this case the function of the 'actors' changes. The protagonists become historical. The 'sacred provider' is the people itself (arrow 1), which produces





heroes and saints from its midst and attains its object practically (arrow 2). The gift or miracle consists in the fact that the people themselves become the protagonists of history.

A good example to demonstrate the change of model is the process of Mexican emancipation; another, which we will describe towards the end of this article, is Nicaragua today.

When the Aztecs invaded the upper valley of Mexico, they subdued the peasant population of the country. 'The highest of their goddesses was called Cihuacóatl, that is, "snake woman", whom they called Tonantzin,' stated Sahagun in his *General History of New Spain*.<sup>11</sup> The famous temple of 'Tonantzin-tla' ('our little mother') still exists today. Thus the aggressive warrior Huitzilopochtli, the (Aztec) god of the sky, subdued the cultivators (worshippers of the female goddess of fertility). At a sanctuary of Tonantzin in Tepeyac, to which the oppressed at the time of the Aztecs came in pilgrimage, the image of our Lady of Guadalupe was later honoured, the Virgin associated with the reconquest of Spain from the Moors. The oppressed class, the indigenous peoples, and later the creoles (since Miguel Sanchez's work of 1648 on *The image of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God of Guadalupe, which miraculously appeared in Mexico*<sup>12</sup>) found in this Virgin, the object of popular devotion, first support for the creation of a national Mexican and anti-Spanish consciousness and later the flag of the emancipation struggles. In 1800 a group of patriots called themselves the 'Guadalupes'. The priest Hidalgo used the flag and the colours of the Virgin of Guadalupe for his army, as did Morelos, while the Spaniards grouped themselves under the banner of the Virgin of Perpetual Succour, which Cortes had saved from the Aztecs in the 'sad night'. In the twentieth century Zapata took Cuernavaca under the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and César Chavez, the leader of the Californian farmworkers' union, is making the Virgin of Guadalupe the driving force of his movement today. In this way a popular religious symbol has become a force for change and the basis of liberation.

#### 4. THE MAIN CONTENTS

Latin American popular religion contains particular practices, whose contents can be described schematically as follows.

##### (a) The sacralisation of time

'Time' is essentially a religious boundary; neither the economic time of two-

weekly or monthly payments nor contracts of employment are measured by *fiestas*. The first short period of time to be sacralised is the day, as a person crosses themselves on leaving the house for work and before eating and sleeping, and similarly in other religious practices during the day.

In a medium period such as a year the thread of religion runs through the whole course of the seasons (particularly in the country, but no less so in the city). Winter is the season of death, spring the season of resurrection of life. The feasts of patron saints derive in practice from ancient totem cults and a long tradition. Important moments are Holy Week, earlier carnival, All Saints and the festivals of the dead.

There is a still longer period, that of a people's history. The people guards the memory of its heroes, its saints and its heroic deeds, which are of supreme importance, particularly in moments of liberation.

### **(b) The sacralisation of space**

Similarly the people enjoys a degree of 'centrality' (the family, the village, the neighbourhood, the district). Everything else is 'peripheral'. The road from one space into the other is something to be negotiated, that from home to factory or to another village (travel is dangerous), and so people must entrust themselves to a saint, an ally or a similar figure. Processions, and above all pilgrimages are a 'road' through profane space towards the centrality of the consecrated space *par excellence*, the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe, those of Copacabana, the Christ of 'Gran Poder' or Esquipula. As long as the religious practice lasts, for a short time there is some control over the space of 'transition', which may be hostile but is now controlled by the people. The people occupies and controls space by its number, and so simultaneously achieves self-affirmation.

### **(c) The sacralisation of rhythm**

A basic expression of popular religion is rhythm, movements to the beat of music, the 'drumbeat' dances to the rhythm of the rumba rattles, the harp, the guitar, the marimba or the *charras*, which in Bolivia are made of bull horns. The rhythm of the year, the month, week or the day is speeded up in the rhythm of the sacred dance, in which the body is united with the rite, in the rhythm of prayer and even ecstasy; this takes place to a much greater degree in the *umbanda* or *candomblé*, in voodoo or other Afro-American forms.

### **(d) The objects of worship**

Popular religion addresses itself in a spirit of faith to the following persons,



powers and spirits as objects. The 'God of the poor' is the *Eternal Father*, who is ever-present and to whom the people normally turn, and who expresses himself in specific actions: in rain, in good harvests, health and safe journeys. He is just and kindly; he is faithful, but also often the cause of evil and misfortune, before which the only possible attitude is resignation. It is well-known that the *blessed Virgin* has replaced the goddesses of cultivators and peasants, who were mother goddesses, and ever since has occupied a central place in Latin America. She is closer than the Eternal Father; she is the compassionate mother. Among Blacks, former slaves, she is Yemandá, the mother of water. Rather than as a historical figure, *Jesus Christ* is depicted in the garb of many 'Christs': there are 'Christs' and 'Lords' with many names and in many places. He is even shown as the *niño*, a child; for example, the leader of the locality or community is called *Niño Alcalde*. The same is true of the *cross*; it is less the historical instrument of his death, but a force against the devil. It hangs by roadsides, on mountains, on the walls of proletarian houses, and they are erected on the roof ridges of houses by the builders: 'For the sake of the holy cross, Lord, free us from all evil'.<sup>13</sup> Particularly striking are the *images of the crucified Jesus*, baroque images of Christ drenched in pain and blood, which depict the sacrifice of the exploited people themselves.

And finally the *saints*: the patrons of the family, districts, villages, communities, of every place. Many of these have been superimposed on ancient divinities, natural forces or principles. There is a saint for everything, to ensure that a girl finds a husband, for faithfulness, fertility, to find lost objects, etc. The dead, and good and bad 'spirits', are also among the objects of worship. Death, with whom a person will hold a relaxed conversation, who is even called 'St Death', is a normal partner in conversations among the people.

Nor, among the Afro-American population, can the 'spirits' (*orishás*) be ignored. They are the object of a special cult and overlap with the saints. What dancers express in ecstasy is a supremely religious world.

Overall we encounter a world populated by protagonists. To the outsider, the person who does not enter this world, it seems ordinary, boring or tragic. For the participants it offers a multiplicity of practices rich in meaning.

### (e) The ethos of popular religion

In general the normal 'attitude' to history, to personal and social life, is tragic and passive. Everything is coloured by a certain theology of resignation: 'It's the will of God,' where 'it' may be the death of a child, illness, loss of a job or death. At least everything has a meaning in popular religion but, as we have noted, sometimes it is a reflection of the dominant ideology in the dominated themselves.

## 5. CURRENT POLITICAL MEANING

In contrast to what has taken place in the central developed countries, the process of secularisation which derived from the Enlightenment never really penetrated to the oppressed people in the Third World (Africa, Asia and Latin America). As a result of poverty, suffering and exploitation the people were never able to share the wealth or the values of capitalism. Secularisation was possible only in a capitalism which no longer needed any religious justification of its rule: surplus value was extracted without the awareness of either property-owner or worker. There was therefore no need to justify it, since no-one regarded it as injustice. Since the people of the peripheral countries could never enjoy the achievements of capitalism, they preserved their traditions. And it does not look as though these traditions will disappear in the future.

### (a) Populist manipulation

Popular religion in Latin America is 'manipulated' on at least three levels. First there are the shamans or 'deceivers' (the old priests in modernised form) who 'operate' with soothsaying, healing through prayer, herbs and blessings. They should be distinguished from traditional medicine. Shamanism is the decadent form of the tradition.

Secondly, political society itself and the populist State (such as those of Perón, Vargas, Rojas Pinilla, etc.) 'use' popular religion to control the people (as did Duvalier until recently). In contrast to the nineteenth-century liberals, who despised Christianity because of its bourgeois, dependent ideology, the populist leaders made links with the people with a gloss of religious charisma (perhaps with the exception of Cárdenas in Mexico).

Thirdly, the official Catholic Church also 'used' popular religion. As mentioned above, the 'Romanisation' of the Catholic Church since the second half of the nineteenth century divided it from popular religion. In reality two sorts of religious practices exist side by side, on the one side those of the people and on the other the official ones. The people, the *mayordomo* or the lay confraternities escort the saint in procession so that the 'father' (the official priest) can, for example, say a mass for him or her. But the two sets of practices have different meanings. In fact they are two different religions. Nonetheless the hierarchical Catholic Church continues to control the centres of pilgrimage and the shrines, and it is clearly aware of this coexistence—i.e., it manipulates.

### (b) The liberating character of popular religion

Different attitudes to Latin American popular religion are, however,



possible, attitudes which do not consist in populist manipulation but continue the process which has begun and carry it to a conclusion.

The first feature which deserves mention is the widespread experience of the so-called 'basic ecclesial communities'. They are firmly rooted in the people; they are the people. They are a new creation from within popular religion. The members of basic communities are adherents of popular religion. By reappropriating God's word (the Bible), they can see their earlier experience in a historical context, relate it to the present and politicise it. They relate them to the present on a new level of consciousness. Without ceasing to be traditional popular religion, this level now acquires a prophetic, critical, creative and political significance. The members deny nothing in their old beliefs, devotions and practices, but they now understand them in a different context, in a new framework of conscious faith, responsible action, organisation, political demands and political action as service. They do this in the name of the same patrons, the same Virgin of Luján, the *Aparecida*, the same Christ of 'Gran Poder' or of Esquipula. This is a religion which begins to move in history.

Secondly, popular religion can, in certain cases, become motivation for acts of liberation and changes, and release a heroic and collective enthusiasm, just as they previously kept the oppressed trapped in the ideology of the oppressor. Just as, since 1808, the Virgin of Guadalupe has stimulated the action of men like Miguel Hidalgo, Morelos or Pavón, so today, for example in Nicaragua, it is not just Christian élites which have taken part in liberation movements. In Nicaragua, alongside the group known as the 'Proletarians', one of the three which founded the Sandinista Front, which consisted of Christians such as *Comandante* Luis Carrion, *Comandante* Wheelock, *Comandante* Mónica Valtodano, etc. the people themselves, the basic communities, ordinary Christian families took up the struggle against Somoza and his oppressive regime because of their faith. It was this which led the FSLN itself to declare on 8 October 1980 in an official document 'On Religion':

Some writers have said that religion is a tool for the alienation of people and serves to justify the exploitation of one class by another. This statement, no doubt, has historical value to the degree that in other historical periods religion offered theoretical support for political domination.

But the FSLN continues:

However, we Sandinistas affirm that our experience shows that when Christians, motivated by their faith, are capable of responding to the needs of the people and history, their beliefs drive them to revolutionary activity. Our experience has shown that it is possible to be a believer and a committed revolutionary at the same time and that there is no irreconcilable contradiction between the two.

The FSLN could make this statement because of the practices of a Christian people which had confirmed its Christian identity in the war of liberation. The mother made the sign of the cross in front of her dead son, took his body and brought it into the church, where a liturgy was celebrated for him as for a hero. Before the battle the young soldiers knelt, made the sign of the cross, asked the Mary Immaculate for help . . . and began to fight. In the north of Estelí I have heard peasants explaining, Bible in hand: 'We are like Nehemiah and Ezra. With one hand we are building the walls of Jerusalem' (they were defending with arms the northern border of Nicaragua against the 'contras' paid by Reagan), 'and with the other we are building the temple, our basic ecclesial community.'

Popular religion is centuries-old and modern, it is faithful and revolutionary, like the indigenous peoples who rebelled in the colonial period (like Tupac Amaru, who saw himself as Moses fighting against Pharaoh), and like the national heroes of the nineteenth century. This is the religion of the Nicaraguan people who met Pope John Paul II with a giant poster showing a picture of the people and beside them St Dominic (the Dominicans were the first missionaries) and our Lady of the Immaculate Conception (the Nicaraguan national religious symbol), all under a slogan which would have been unintelligible on another continent, in Europe—in Poland perhaps: 'Welcome, John Paul II. Thank God and the revolution.'

Only Latin American popular religion can create such a synthesis. It emerged among the indigenous people defeated by the Spaniards and Portuguese. It flowered among slaves and the oppressed. It is alive in the areas on the edges of cities, in impoverished rural areas and in the destitution of an exploited people, dominated and oppressed. But, trusting in God, believing in his providence, that people waits like the 'Christ of patience' (seated, with the crown of thorns, head in hand, his elbow supported on his knee) for crucifixion—but also for liberation.

*Translated from the author's German by Francis McDonagh*

#### Notes

1. See my article 'Cultura latinoamericana y Filosofía de la liberación' *Cristianismo y Sociedad* 80 (1984) 9–45. See further E. Dussel *Historia General de la Iglesia en América Latina* I/I (Salamanca 1983); *idem*, *Historia de la Iglesia en América Latina—Colonización y liberación 1492–1983* (Mexico 1983); *El Catolicismo popular en la Argentina* (History) (Buenos Aires 1969) (bibliography pp 167–233); CEHILA 'Religiosidade popular na América Latina' *Revista de Cultura Vozes* 4 (1979); Seladoc team *Religiosidad Popular* (Salamanca 1976); R. Azzi *O episcopado do Brasil frente*



ao catolocismo popular (Petrópolis 1977); E. Bosi *Cultura de massa e cultura popular—leituras de operárias* (Petrópolis 3° 1977); Various *Fe cristiana y revolución sandinista en Nicaragua* (Managua 1980); G. Giménez *Cultura popular y religión en el Anáhuac* (Mexico 1978); CELAM *Iglesia y religiosidad popular en América Latina* (Bogota 1977); E. Hoornaert *Formação do catolicismo brasileiro 1550–1800* (Petrópolis 2° 1978); G.P. Süss *Volkskatholizismus in Brasilien* (Munich and Mainz 1978); *Religiosidad y fe en América Latina* ed. M. Jorda (Santiago 1975); *idem. La sabiduría de un pueblo* (Santiago 1975); *idem. El catolicismo criollo*, (Santiago 1975); CELAM *Los grupos afroamericanos—Aproximaciones y pastoral* (Bogota 1980).

2. See E. Dussel *Para leer los Grundrisse* Chap. 18.
3. See E. Dussel 'Cultura Latinoamericana' the article cited in note 1.
4. See E. Dussel *Historia General*, the work cited in note 1, at pp 157ff; 196ff; 566ff.
5. See *ibid.* pp 103ff (the religious prehistory of Latin America).
6. See *idem.* pp 281ff (the evangelisation of Latin America); *ibid.* 561ff (everyday life).
7. See *ibid.*
8. A.J. Greimas *Sémantique structurale* (Paris 1966); V. Propp *Morphologie du conte* (Paris 1970).
9. O. di Lullo *El espíritu cristiano en el folklore de Santiago* (Tucuman 1943) p. 352.
10. See O. Maduro *Religión y conflicto social* (Mexico 1981).
11. Book I, Chap. 6 (III, Mexico 1956) p. 352.
12. Imprenta Calderón (Mexico 1648).
13. E. Zeballos *Cancionero popular* (Buenos Aires 1891) p. 68.