

Book Review – Understanding Folk Religion

It was fall and I was talking to Lona, a white, middle class woman and practicing Catholic who lived across the street. She recounted her oldest son's recent accident while he was driving home from college. Lona said that he survived because her deceased grandmother was watching over him. Several years ago, I worked with an orthopedic surgeon in northern Virginia who claimed to be Lutheran but believed in reincarnation. I have met Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists who venerate ancestors and tree spirits; actions that have nothing to do with, or are even condemned by, the canonical texts of those faiths.

When I began the study of world religions I naïvely assumed that Muslims would generally follow the Koran, Hindus the Vedas, and Buddhists the Pali Canon, even as I followed, or tried to follow, the Bible. I quickly found this *prima facie* assumption to be false, and upon reflection realized it was disproved by my own experience. All religious beliefs, including my own, are colored by cultural, environmental, and personal factors quite unrelated to holy texts. Many of these factors fall under the broad category of "Folk Religions", and in *Understanding Folk Religion*, Paul G. Hiebert, R Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou provide an eye-opening and comprehensive understanding of this topic. As professors of missions and anthropology and as experienced field workers, these men are well qualified to write such a book.

Summary

Section One begins by developing their analytical model. Missions have suffered in the past 400 years because missionaries, typically Protestant and Enlightenment-influenced Westerners, have presented science as the solution to problems in this world and Christianity as the solution to problems in the hereafter. The result has been a "split level Christianity". To peoples who believe that some type of broken relationship or spiritual discord is the fundamental cause of all misfortune, Jesus seems to offer nothing to address many of the real problems of this life. This book is an attempt to show Western Christians how to fix this misunderstanding.

Religion includes cultural, social, personal, and supernatural systems that include cognitive, emotional, practical, and moral factors. In the West, religion seems to be a small part of life, but in most of the world religion is the foundation of every thought, word, and action. All religions use organic metaphors (gods, goddesses, other living beings, animal, and plants) and mechanical metaphors (immutable laws such as karma, processes such as fate, and power such as mana) to describe reality. For example, an African tribesman may attribute disease to angering a god or ancestor, an Indian follower of folk Hinduism may believe that the disease was caused by bad prior actions (karma), or a Muslim Sufi may chalk it up as fate.

Section Two describes beliefs in folk religions, such as how adherents find meaning in life, explain death, attain "the good life", deal with misfortune, discern the unknown, and maintain a moral order. Folk religionists find meaning in a variety of areas:

1. Synchronic (current time) – in being, in becoming, in belonging, in a home, in doing, and in possessions
2. Diachronic (through time) – in biography, in group history, and in cosmic drama

Folk religionists find meaning in death because the dead become ancestors, powerful spirit beings who are honored and remembered by their descendants for at least four generations. Folk religionists usually define "the good life" similarly to other past humans; health, wealth, long life, many pleasures, and many descendants. They strive for the good life through a mixture of science, to affect the natural world, and merit and magic (witchcraft, astrology, etc.), to affect the spiritual world that impacts daily life. Folk religionists follow visions and use various forms of divination for guidance. They understand and strive to maintain a moral order through community restrictions on conduct including taboo, relationships, and the like.

Section Three covered folk religious practices. It includes how people express religious beliefs through signs and symbols, how they use myths to tell their cosmic stories, how they enact their beliefs through rituals, how they organize religious activities, and how they transform themselves through religious movements. Signs represent part of reality. For example, the word "flower" is a sign and a symbol that communicates the image of a real part of many

plants to our brains. Symbols communicate between people, but they also perform an act. The symbol string of “I now pronounce you man and wife” makes a single man and single woman into a married couple. Myths make sense of the universe, communicate and enforce values and beliefs, provide identity, and provide community with others who believe in those myths. Religious rituals mark life transitions, balance formality and informality in life, and dramatize myths and other beliefs. Leaders of faith groups such as priests create and enforce institutions and orthodoxy, while other leaders such as prophets introduce people to new realities and call them back to old truths. When life in a culture or society is too disrupted, religious movements challenge and sometimes change core beliefs to help people cope with new realities. Groups can return to their nativist religious roots, accommodate new ideas with the old, or forsake old beliefs to adopt new ones.

Every chapter ended with a discussion of how Christians should respond, but Section Four summarized the Christian response to folk religions. The first step is developing a truly Biblical theology, including properly understanding the invisible, worship, submission, the Kingdom of God, power, the Cross, discernment, suffering, and death. Locals must contextualize their practices consistent with the Bible and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Evaluation

Understanding Folk Religion is an excellent primer. Worldwide, folk Islam, folk Hinduism, folk Buddhism, and even folk Christianity is more common than the “pure” forms of any of these major religions. Islam in West Africa, for example, has about as many forms as there are Muslim tribes. Syncretism, the mixing of beliefs, also affects the Church. Hiebert and his colleagues provide a deep understanding of folk religions from South America to Siberia, and explain why peoples do the things that they do.

This book should be standard fare for missionaries, pastors, and cross cultural workers of all stripes. Lay Christians and prayer warriors with a heart for missions will find *Understanding Folk Religion* useful. Since the world has come to America, and since American folk religion is on the rise with the Pagan movement and ethnicity-based religious groups, even home missionaries could benefit.

Conclusion

Understanding Folk Religion, similar to the famous missions text *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, is worth reading and rereading. Followers of Christ will be more effective in sharing Jesus if they do.