
A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

Natural and Christian Priesthood in Folk Religiosity

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This reflection on five themes in pastoral theology results from linking some theological and anthropological ideas under the influence of parochial and personal duties. After sketching various definitions of folk-religion we argue that merit is its prime dogma. Distinguishing between naturally occurring priesthood and Christian ministry we discuss death, and finally suggest that some priests espouse the idea of folk-religion to protect the purity of their vocation.

Definitions of Folk-Religion

There is no single definition of folk-religion. The way it is understood by scholars or religious groups says as much about them as about the thing they are trying to define. Perhaps five broad areas are identifiable.

a. Superstition, folk-lore, and traditional wisdom – appearing to deal with supernatural entities by ways foreign to established or prevailing religion.

b. The traditional religion of ethnic groups. While usually obvious for tribal and closed societies, long established world religions can develop marked ethnicity.

c. Popular versions and regional variants of world religions. The notion of syncretism will often fall into this category as traditional ethnic religion interacts with an incoming religiosity – as in many parts of South America where Christianity encounters local deities and sacrifices, or in South-East Asia where Buddhism encounters concepts of illness and spirit-possession.

d. The inherent religiosity of mankind irrespective of its cultural expression – man as *homo religiosus* encountering the sacred as positive or negative power.

e. Official orthodoxy with doctrines of reward and comfort in an after-life defined by some liberation theologians as a denial of true Christianity. This quite modern case is an ideological and derogatory use and is mentioned to show how the phrase 'folk-religion' can be

completely inverted given a suitable context and motivation.

Any definition of folk-religion needs to be aware of a time dimension and the fact that religions change. Folk-religion as ethnic religion may be transformed to the level of orthodoxy at a world-religion level if the ethnic group expands or comes into acceptable recognition. The growth of literacy and a literature facilitates this as in the historic case of Sikh Religion. It may also be that centres of learning and instruction can so decontextualize a religion from its popular base that the wise need no longer be actively committed to practise. We might even suggest that folk-traditions will be increasingly produced as a religion is increasingly hierarchized and formalized. One use of the phrase would thus serve as an index of the distance between theologian and ordinary adherent.

Time also affects the mission process as it waxes and wanes. Initial evangelization will accept levels of religious performance which will be deemed as inadequate at some later date. The incoming world religion is often seen as bearing a revealed truth which lightens the human-spawned darkness of native folk-religiosity. Folk-religion becomes natural religion as the contacting faith is believed to be revealed and supernatural. Similarly folk-religiosity is likely to be labelled as deficient in periods of secularization. We might even suggest as an hypothesis that folk-religion defined as superstition will only be ascribed with significance in periods of initial mission and later decline, and not when a religion is solidly established at the heart of cultural power.

In the following discussion folk-religion is taken to mean a popular interpretation of English Christianity including within it a motivation arising from a moral sense grounded in the human desire for meaning. As such we are combining elements of several of the kinds of definition already outlined. For despite the fact that a list of types of folk-religion can be made it is unlikely that pure examples of them will occur in practice. There is a kind of inherent vagueness in the term itself. David Martin's notion of subterranean theology draws out doctrinal elements, Edmund Leach's practical religion pinpoints the domain of action, while Edward Bailey's interest in implicit religion gets closer to the idea of man as *homo religiosus*.[1] It is quite obviously a complex phenomenon that lies before us and we can only sketch some basic features of it. This we begin with the notion of merit.

Merit as Folk Religion's Prime Dogma

There are some very basic difficulties involved in using a word like merit in any general way, because it has some specific historical doctrinal meanings. For simplicity's sake I take merit to mean the

benefit reckoned to accrue to a person as a result of that person's moral endeavours. I intend to show it to be a powerful idea both in the Christian world and also in the realm of Buddhist thought. The fact that Protestant theology has tended to set its face against ideas of merit and that Catholic thought has circumscribed it with numerous theological qualifications shows that here some basically human inclinations encounter and are criticized by Christian theological reflection.

My assumption is that man as a meaning making creature inhabiting a social world views merit as a kind of moral meaning. It helps him interpret life's events and turn them to his own advantage. It emerges naturally from his social nature and from the idea of personal responsibility. Merit is not simply an abstract idea but is given what might be called a moral charge, it is invested with a dynamic power, and it thus embraces both emotional and more logical aspects of existence. Furthermore merit is seen as a vital component in an overall scheme of cause and effect.

Studies of practical religion in Hindu and Buddhist contexts have demonstrated with remarkable consistency the importance of the process of making merit. It might seem so obvious that merit would loom large within religions grounded in the concept of karma as a process of moral cause and effect governing reincarnation in accord with the goodness or badness of the life lived in any one lifetime. But often, especially in the case of Buddhism, the popular desire for making merit to assist in a better quality of rebirth and in a happier life now, is at odds with the official theology of the religion. S.J. Tambiah's important work on the ideology of merit in village Buddhism shows how villagers believe it possible for, say, a son to become a buddhist monk for a short period of time to generate merit which can be transferred to a parent.[2] To simplify his useful concept of 'ethical vitality' it seems as though a life lived fully in accord with prescribed moral patterns produces what might be called a power which has beneficial results. It makes for a happier mental state in this existence, and under the buddhist notion of samsara or rebirth in future lives, it causes a better situation in life next time around. But older people realize that they have broken the precepts of moral living and have generated a negative rather than positive karmic power. To offset this they believe it possible to benefit from the power generated by someone else who actually does fulfil moral obligations, albeit for only a restricted period of time. The power generated is all the stronger, or its merit all the more, if the disciplined life is that of a young man in the full strength of his virility. The controlled sexuality of the celibate is one prime source of merit for it is a type case and a desirable example of controlled living. The belief in such vicarious goodness or transfer of merit may well be bad buddhist thinking but it

is widespread at the popular level of existence, and in Christian as well as Buddhist cultures.

In Christianity the desire for merit was, of course, exploited in medieval Catholicism and the reformation responded accordingly. The debate on faith and works was an extension of the older Augustinian and Pelagian controversy on the place of human endeavour in salvation. English parishes of Puritan bent could even yield a majority thinking they might earn heaven.[3] Geoffrey Wainwright's interesting systematic theology astutely contrasts eastern funerary liturgies which stress the light and peace into which God takes the faithful soul, with the Augustinian west's shift of emphasis to a purgatorial cleansing which eventually outcropped in a pile of multiplied masses and peddled indulgences.[4] But the relationship between behaviour and divine response is already present in the Bible and a rapid sketch of how it has been viewed by churchmen soon shows how easily the popular mind could misinterpret what is there in a way which emphasizes the power of merit in the religious life. In 1 Corinthians St. Paul tells the Christian congregation that some of them are ill and others have died because of their impiety in coming to, and their behaviour at, the fellowship meal (11.30). John Calvin on this text comments that the Roman Church is still abusing that meal in its Mass doctrine, but more important, he says that many of the Reformed confession were hypocritical and irreverent in their approach to it. So much so that no one should wonder at the cause of so many wars, pestilences, failures of the crop, disasters and calamities. In a similar way the Book of Common Prayer writes into the exhortation within the Lord's Supper a warning that those who receive unworthily may kindle God's wrath and provoke him to plague us with diverse diseases and sundry kinds of death. While the theology of the Prayer Book is undoubtedly grounded in ideas of mercy and Christ's merit, this kind of talk affords ample opportunity for the unthinking or untutored mind to suppose that if man possesses a negative merit it is possible for him to gain positive merit on his own, and that God will punish error and will use misfortune as his agent. All this despite the emphasis on Christ's merit and on the fact that human merit should be of no account at all: 'not weighing our merits but pardoning our offences'.

But it is to pastoral contexts we turn to furnish the data behind the suggestion that merit is a contemporary issue demanding reflection. For simplicity's sake we distinguish between positive and negative consequences of behaviour, or in other words between merit and demerit. The first is perhaps more obvious than the second, but the second more powerful than the first and more in need of pastoral understanding.

The positive sense of merit is enshrined in the street-creed which

affirms the individual as a respectable person who does harm to no-one and who helps others whenever possible. In the event of such a person's serious illness or death the bereaved or friend may ask why such a thing should have befallen such an obviously worthy man. The implication being that he did not merit misfortune. In the case of a child dying it becomes even clearer that nothing deserving death could possibly have been done by the infant. The question may even be raised as to why the wicked flourish and escape the apparently powerful effect of retribution. Untimely death speaks of unfairness rather than of providence in our aseptic, post-Victorian world.

The negative aspect of merit is much less obvious and tends to be less of a public response. A woman in her prime is struck with a terminal illness. The pastor expects the question 'Why me?' but instead is told a story of a long-distant moral lapse of youth which bears heavily upon her troubled conscience. She not only thinks but is convinced that the reason for the present situation lies in that transgression whose consequences are now being visited upon her. She believes in the inevitability of this causal link between sin and illness. Or again there is the case of the young woman whose first baby is born very slightly malformed. Instead of posing a question answerable from medical knowledge of embryo development she is sure that the fault is hers, even though she cannot pin-down its precise source. Other similar examples could be given, but the interesting fact in these two cases is that morality is associated with bodily health; a kind of moral-somatic relationship is established at the cause and effect system of life.

The issue at stake for the pastor is the difference between a mechanical inevitability and a sense of trust in God, between impersonality and a personal relationship. The popular concept of merit seems to imply a scheme of *quid pro quo* balance of moral behaviour and success in life. The novelist Brian Moore writes of an elderly Catholic mother who links an early and fleeting incestuous thought with the subsequent failure of her family to be a flourishing and friendly group. She says to God, 'the priests are wrong. You are not forgiving, you never forgive'.[5] On a more directly theological plane that greatest of Anglican thinkers Richard Hooker grasped the folly of the popular mind on the issue of merit and death. In book five of Ecclesiastical Polity he suggests that one reason we should pray for a timely death is that uncharitable minds may produce rash, sinister, and suspicious verdicts and think that God is visiting us with his wrath.[6] This would bring dishonour to a family despite the foolishness of the reasoning. Though that idea is hardly widespread today the question of meriting misfortune is still part of the private world of self-reflection into which the careful pastor may be admitted.

Rather than stop at this point and stress the necessity of overcoming

these crude ideas by preaching the gospel of gracious acceptance and human trust I want to introduce the further theme of natural priesthood and Christian priesthood. Having done this we can then more adequately handle the relationship between merit and misfortune in the light of that gospel.

Natural Priesthood and Christian Ministry

Practically all religions have specialist ritual leaders whose activity is astonishingly similar in the performance of rites of passage, in birth, initiation, marriage, death, honouring of monarchs, in the preservation of knowledge and learning, in blessing and cursing the people, and in their control of supernatural events. They are *foci* of ultimate values. Perhaps this was best summarized by the now often unfashionable author E.O. James in his study of the Nature and Function of Priesthood.

> In a precarious, unpredictable and hazardous environment the institution of priesthood has enabled struggling humanity to advance on life's pilgrimage with hope and confidence and with a sense of security by supplying a power to help and heal, to renew and reassure, to cohere and conserve.[7]

It is, we might suggest, as the priest handles and interprets supernatural power in society that he becomes involved with merit. What we might call natural priesthood is a central way of validating processes of merit acquisition and providing means of avoiding the consequences of negative merit. Man is not only a meaning seeking animal but one which seeks what might be called moral meaning within and behind the vicissitudes of life, and it is here that the notion of merit become important. Merit is the moral value or charge placed upon behaviour and acts, and which is believed to be an active force resulting in consquences for the performer. The religiosity associated with this kind of reasoning is common to mankind and is an extension of man's social sense of reciprocity. It is also deeply linked with what has been widely called folk-religion, that manifestation of popular conceptions within each major religious tradition which often seems at odds with the official theology of their trained priesthoods.[8]

John Habgood has devoted an entire chapter of his recent book to folk-religion and comments on the way some priests object to their ministry being seen as one which decorates civic occasions or prostitutes the sacraments for those who do not believe in them.[9] Here he raises the issue which I suggest is best discussed as a complex contradiction or conflict between natural priesthood and Christian priesthood. Within this complex relationship merit and death stand out as areas of life in which the priest is involved and where his

Christian theological values may contradict the values expected of him by many people. His natural priesthood and his Christian priesthood may be at odds.

As a natural priest he is expected to explain how merit works, to foster its positive and restrict its negative powers. He must understand the fate of the dead and assist their passage to other worlds. When dealing with the committed eucharistic community he may feel competent in relation to death and handle the intractible ravages of misfortune by turning to what he is trained to call the problem of evil. In relation to the outsider or peripheral parishioner he may find himself unconvinced by his own words. It is here that pastoral integrity becomes an issue. The implicit conflict between popular expectation and the charge of his ordination may be aggravated by the possibility that funerals remind him of his own mortality. Some research suggests that not a few men are attracted to the priesthood by the possibility of gaining control of death in a way unavailable to laymen.[10] If this is true would it apply to Christian priesthood as much as to natural priesthood?

These are questions seldom discussed, even in training priests. For clarity of discussion we can suggest that natural priesthood, like parenthood, is a natural capacity expressed in social institutions. It is part of human reaction to life's problems and ideals. It ought not to be thought of in terms of some evolutionary development from shamanism or witchdoctoring but as an ever present response to ever present needs. The one serious attempt to look at this whole area by a group of widely differing Anglican and Free-Church theologians at the very end of the last century made the unfortunate mistake of adopting such an evolutionist stance. They asked themselves the question whether there was a 'generic idea of priesthood?' Dr. Sanday linked it with sacrifice, Dr. Driver with evolving cultic activity, Father Puller of Cowley omitted 'the imperfect and partially distorted conceptions of the heathen' and associated priesthood with divine appointment for sacrificial ritual. Dr. Moberly clearly expressed the evolutionist bias of the day in viewing the generic idea as 'merely the dim, unrealized feeling after what Christianity brings to light and consciousness'.[11]

This concept of generic priesthood is precisely what we have called natural priesthood. While that Victorian group set their debate within biblical contexts and with a serious historical perspective we assume a broader, comparative, and contemporary framework of discussion. Instead of linking priesthood with sacrifice as they did, though in fairness it must be said that that was their explicit intention, we connect it with the concept of merit, broadly interpreted as a theory of moral causality.

The Christian priesthood has a long and varied history. It exists in a grand diversity of form across the world even though theologically

we often discuss it as a single concept. The complicated nature of the Christian priesthood results from theological, historical, political, and cultural factors galore and we cannot begin to discuss them here. The point I do want to make is that whatever particular understanding of Christian priesthood exists locally it is something that needs to be seen as existing in relation to and perhaps we should say in dialogue with the equally local concept of natural priesthood. Having abandoned an evolutionary scheme, though always bearing in mind the historical nature of the Christian tradition, we see each year, each contemporary period, as one in which the human need of priesthood is met with the Christian, or *a* Christian form of priesthood. So each local church, and each individual minister, needs to see the Christian priesthood as perpetually undergoing a change as a most dynamic and creative response to the needs and expectations of the local population. Sometimes that population will be more specifically Christian and sometimes very non-Christian. It is the inter-face between Christian belief and local belief which is critical. Quite often, as in Britain, that local belief will be heavily grounded in Christian concepts of the past which former missionaries and pastors will have introduced to a society, and which continue as part of the social system itself. But even such a Christian culture requires contemporary challenge and support.

Death and the Priesthoods

There is only space here to think briefly about death. In most cultures local ritual experts handle this human inevitability. Natural religion, if I may use this rather dangerous word, asks for priestly competence and ritual expertise as well as for some portrayal of the destiny of the dead. In many cultures this has led to extensive theologies of the afterlife: heaven is given a geography and a sociology, where rivers are crossed and reunions accomplished. But in Christian theology, grounded as it is in the uniqueness of Christ's resurrection and a lively hope in its consequences in a new order of reality to be established by God, very little indeed can be said about that afterlife. Questions of restored human relationships and even of the nature of the self in that realm remain unanswerable. Indeed the marriage service is most wise in reflecting biblical reticence in saying the union is till death does them part. This brings us to an important conclusion as far as the two priesthoods and death is concerned, namely that Christian priesthood demands a kind of 'spiritual incompetence'. The popular mind expects natural priests to furnish knowledge of the dead in the life beyond, perhaps Christian theology does not justify such an explanation. Trust rather than control over destiny would seem a more Christian

attitude, especially when we recall the earlier discussion on merit. Christian theology of death is part of theology of life here and now, and just as merit is shown to be a mechanical outlook and far inferior to the Christian grasp of forgiveness and creative acceptance, so in death trust should replace ritual certainties. This is why Christian priesthood can be happy to espouse 'spiritual incompetence'. It is easy to be misunderstood here: perhaps one final idea may help clarify the point. Much has been written recently about the clerical profession. Such professional guilds of selected and trained persons are not intrinsically Christian, they have existed in practically all the religions of the world. Basic to them is ritual and theological competence. Such competence underlies the power of the priest which can be used for good or ill. The possibility of competence is not something which should be immediately accepted. In the present day we need to ask how Christian theology guides our understanding of death. It might be, and I suggest it is, the case that more is asked of a Christian priest than his theology allows him to say. And it may be asked of him by members of his committed congregation as well as by parishioners of infrequent participation. Within the individual life of that minister the demands of natural priesthood and of Christian priesthood meet.

Within that individual life, as well as within the corporate group of ministers, Christian priesthood needs to develop and mature and to replace and transform natural priesthood. This can never be accomplished once and for all in one age and then passed on to other ages and places, it is part of the perpetual dynamic creativity of faith in response to God and to the people one serves. Perhaps it is the question of 'power' and mechanical operation which is at stake and which is judged by the divine humility. Perhaps too Christian priesthood was never better expressed and seldom seen as more directly contradicting natural priesthood than on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. The washing of feet baptized power into humility (a word transformed by early Christians), while the pride destroying death of the great high priest of our profession turned priesthood once for all away from magical display and popular demand. Love is offered to trust and this it is which counters merit and facilitates grace.

The doctrine of creation enables us to see mankind as a religious animal dwelling upon his flawed nature and seeking understanding of life itself. He is *homo religiosus* because he bears the *imago dei*. The doctrine of redemption takes up the incarnation as a focal point exemplifying proper human response to God, and it is one of trust and responsive love. Human nature seems ever prone to slip into mechanistic and meritorious ideas as when the fire at York Minster was seen as the wrath of God following a disputed ecclesiastical appointment. Against all the background of supposed secularism and presumed Christian education it is incredible that the Archbishop of Canterbury

had to refute ideas of divine retribution.[12]

By contrast it should be the divine humility which is established as the foundation for Christian ministry. This calls for an abandoning of self-confidence in controlling reality and for a trust in God. The Christian priest enters his ministry through the categories of life and culture just as Christ redeemed mankind through the categories of Jewish culture. Pastoral integrity can thus be seen to lie not in professional expertise, nor yet in seeking to protect one's vocation from popular corruption as we will now explain, but in the perpetual transformation of natural priesthood into Christian ministry. A process which is a constant reminder of the dynamic nature of the priesthood of all believers.

Priests and Folk Religion

The relationship between trained and official priesthoods and the untutored religion of laypeople is always likely to show certain strains, not least because they have different interests and ambitions. Whereas priests may be theologically interested in ultimate truth and its articulation the people may be more concerned with proximate issues of happiness and family. The one single aspect of priest-lay relation which I wish to pinpoint here concerns what might be called purity of vocation. I have elsewhere talked of clerical self-absolution in connection with the very use of the term folk-religion.[13] Self-absolution or the maintenance of purity of vocation is, I believe, one important factor lying behind the popularity of ideas of folk-religion. To label certain members of the parish as folk-religionists is to categorize them in a way which begins to justify the ministerial life as it services these people. By contrast the key parish members, perhaps those who regularly attend the eucharist, discussion group, or church council, are reckoned to be among the true and genuine believers. Degree of ecclesiastical participation can easily underlie the way such supportive parishioners are viewed. I need not rehearse some of the ways in which Anglican pastoral manuals have classified different members of the community.[13] The interesting question is whether Christian ministers find in this phrase, folk-religion, some relief from the pressing worry that perhaps they are selling the gospel short in having to marry, baptize, and bury, and to otherwise patronize gatherings of those peripheral church attenders who seem to show practically no direct and explicit Christian commitment. As ministers in a State church their presence at formal civic and national occasions can seem decorative at worst and religiously vague at best. In the earlier terms of this paper they may see themselves as natural priests serving social, political, or psychological ends but not the ends of the

gospel of Christ. In my previous discussion of this theme in connection with Bruce Reed's *The Dynamics of Religion* I suggested that the snatching at this phrase, folk-religion, was just such a means of justifying the self and its sense of vocation to the Christian gospel amidst the apparently worldly and social claims of the broad membership of the church.[4] Whilst it is possible to appreciate the usefulness of such an act, we have sought in this paper to set such ideas of folk-religion alongside its proper partner, natural priesthood to hint at the naturalness of a religiosity in people matched by a similar natural coping with it in certain power-figures designated as natural priests.

It may well be that there are certain natural talents which make good natural priests, and perhaps it should even be the case that those with the task of selecting men for the ministry should be alert to them. At the popular level one hears very regularly of people who have been helped by clergy who have hardly mentioned God at all and who are viewed with much thanks for the help they have given. There is in that general praise of 'the spiritual man' something very human, welcoming, and intrinsically supportive – the ability to help a faultering soul regain integrity, find a strength and resolve, and set out again to complete life's duties. But all such wholesome natural abilities still need transforming under the vision of Christ. The priest who might seek relief in the category of folk-religiosity ought perhaps to start a step back and ask whether his own life is not itself grounded in a natural priesthood. It may be that the battle within him between natural and Christian priesthood (or perhaps it is better expressed as the creative process of transformation by which natural priesthood becomes Christian ministry) ought to be seen more clearly so that less anxiety may lie behind the perception of this dichotomy amongst the parishioners.

Too much emphasis on theological ideas such as that of eschatology can shift attention from the dynamic tension already well established in the contemporary ministerial life. The nature of the Christian ministry is one of realizing Christian ministry within the demands and inclinations of natural priesthood and folk-religiosity. And this is an ever present process, it belongs to the structure of ministry and not to the past history of priesthood.

NOTES

1 David Martin, *Sociology of English Religion*, SCM, London 1967; Edmund Leach, *Dialectic In Practical Religion*, CUP, Cambridge 1968; edward Bailey, of Winterbourne Rectory, Bristol, leads group study in Implicit Religion and allied phenomena. Other studies of practical religiosity include:

Robert Towler, *Homo Religiosus,* Constable, London 1974; James Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825–1875,* Clarendon Press, Oxford 1976; David Clark, *Between Pulpit and Pew,* CUP, Cambridge 1982.

2 S.J. Tambiah, 'The Ideology of Merit' in E. Leach, op. cit.
3 P. Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society 1559–1620,* Clarendon, Oxford 1982, p 202.
4 G. Wainwright, *Doxology,* Epworth Press, London 1980.
5 B. Moore, *An Answer from Limbo,* Penguin, Harmondsworth 1962.
6 R. Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity,* 5.46.3.
7 E.O. James, *The Nature and Function of Priesthood,* Barnes Noble, New York 1961.
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10 Y. Spiegel, *The Grief Process,* SCM, London 1978, pp 21, 145.
11 W. Sanday, ed., *Priesthood and Sacrifice,* Longman, London 1900.
12 Reports in *The Times* 10 July 1984; *Church Times* 13 July 1984.
13 D.J. Davies, 'Pastoral Theology and Folk Religion as a Category of Self-Absolution' *Research Bulletin Birmingham Institute of Worship,* Birmingham University 1983.
14 ——, 'Anglican Secratarianism: A Rethinking of the Dynamics of Riligion', *Churchman* 95, 1981, pp 139–149.

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