

# INTRODUCTION

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**Abstract:** People's beliefs, whether they fall within the teachings of the church or not, belong to the folk religion. The studies of folk religion comprise all social classes, peasant culture and middle class as well as workers. Investigations of folk religion do not only focus on the pre-industrial era, but also on religiously oriented beliefs and customs among people in the secularised modern society.

In our days it is important to examine how the many immigrants and their churches adjust to completely new conditions, for example in the way of dressing and concerning food prohibitions.

One field of research which is suited for international comparisons concerns the significance of religion in cultural meetings across borders of different kinds, and those conflicts and forms of co-operation that may arise.

Religion and politics do not have to be opposed, but may also be linked to each other. What looks like religious antagonisms may in fact have a political motivation. The main interest for the folklorist is the role religion plays for common people within different groupings and not just within the political or religious elite.

**Keywords:** Religious belief, religious adaptation, immigrants, cultural meetings, religion and politics

At first I will say something about folk religion. What is that? People's beliefs, whether they fall within the teachings of the church or not, belong to the folk religion. This is true irrespective of if people believe in and put their trust in divine beings, or relate to evil beings like the devil or other supernatural beings. Popular visions, as well as experiences of miracles and religious healing, are included in the field of study. When talking about folk religiosity it is not relevant to separate popular belief and other kinds of belief that would be labelled religious belief. What people believe in must be possible to view as belonging to the field of folk religion, even though earlier folkloristic researchers often separated the religious dimension from the popular belief. The latter was seen as belonging to the folkloristic field of study, while the religious belief was placed within the realm of religious studies. Folklorists were not supposed to concern themselves with folk religion, but a shift in this respect came about when a new generation of folklorists started to establish themselves during the 1970s.

The studies of folk religion comprise all social classes, peasant culture and middle class as well as workers. Religion is evident both in ordinary people and in members of revival movements or in immigrants belonging to another religion than Christianity. Folk religion, in the form of specific conduct and rituals, is not exercised only in public places of worship like the churches, but also to a large extent in the homes, both in the everyday life and on Sundays and other holidays.

Investigations of folk religion do not only focus on the pre-industrial era, when Christianity had a stronger position, but also on religiously oriented beliefs and customs among people in the secularized modern society. Also the New Age and Satanism of our time become interesting objects of study.

Studies of folk religiosity have come to attract more and more attention in several countries. In 1989 in Graz, Austria, an Ethnology congress was held around the theme "Folk piety". The lectures have been published in the form of an anthology (*Volksfrömmigkeit* 1990). In Germany and Austria, an anthology with the title "Religion und Alltag" was published in 1990, in which the authors analyse autobiographies from Catholic areas (*Religion* 1990). At the international congress, which SIEF (Society International for Ethnology and Folklore) organized in Bergen in Norway in 1990, it was decided that a special commission within the SIEF, for the study of "Folk Religion" should be established. I was given the task of conducting this commission.

A first symposium was held in Stockholm in 1993, in close cooperation with The Swedish Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities which paid the expenses. The topic was "Religion in Everyday Life Then and Now". The lecturers came from the whole of Europe, and their contributions have been published by Nils-Arvid BRINGÉUS in 1994 (*Religion* 1994). The focus was on how religion manifests itself in lifestyle, beliefs, upbringing and norms.

The theme for the following SIEF symposium in Portugal 1996 was "Folk Religion, Continuity and Change". Within this wide topic one can illustrate to what extent folk religion forms a force of change or plays a preserving role in a changeable world. Folk religion may, from a modernity perspective, be studied with respect to the development from a farmers' society to an industrial society. What is old may be preserved, at the same time as it is exposed to changes. It is important to illuminate the stability as well as the change, and the forces behind such processes. Changes may also mean a return to earlier conditions, customs and beliefs. How and why does this happen in a modern society? How is it that the old becomes filled with a new content, and thereby gets a new life in a new social context? What influence does the media have as a force of change? We returned to such issues in lectures and discussions during the symposium. The empirical data was collected from different parts of Europe, and ranged from past to present times, but problems and perspectives constituted a common base for discussion. The contributions have been published in a book edited by me and Maria SANTA MONTEZ in Lisboa (*Folk Religion* 1999).

I also want to introduce a few general issues which are suited for research and network cooperation on a European basis as well. In the Nordic countries we have discussed a cooperation consisting of a network around the theme "The Adaptation of the Nordic Churches and Revival movements/Free Churches to the Modern/Industrial Society". The network wants to examine how the State churches and the revival movements adjusted to the changing conditions of society, when the modern industrial society developed, in the middle of the 19th century, and the progress until today. In that connection we can ask: What happens if the adjustment to

the surrounding world becomes too complete? In what way does that prepare the ground for the formation of new religious movements. Such movements may on the one hand have fundamentalist traits, in contrast to too much adjustment within other churches and denominations. The movements may on the other hand be signs of an adaptation to the needs of the modern people, e.g. self-regard and self-realization, happiness in this earthly life.

In what way is the development of new movements related to the social engagement or lack of engagement of the established churches? What does it mean if the churches become too centred around this world and neglect or diminish the transcendent perspective on faith, life as a journey towards eternity? What about the view on good and bad? Why has Satanism won attention in later days? Is it a reaction against the churches' moderation and denial of the evil forces in the existence, compared to before.

What has ecumenism meant for the processes of adjustment to the surrounding society? How have the religious perspectives come to show in politics? Comparisons of the work within the Christian parties in Europe can be done, with reference to discussions and actions concerning religious and ethical issues etc.

How do you regard technical inventions as radio, film and television or sports, which might become competitors for people's interest? They might contribute to changing people's norms and beliefs. In our days one can consider the opinions about homosexuality. How have the churches and revival movements regarded the discussions about membership in the European Union, the EU? Threat or possibility? In this context one can look at the reactions concerning different alcohol customs and alcohol legislation, which is a sensitive topic in the Nordic countries.

What about the differences between generations? What kind of renewal is coming from the young people and why do they leave earlier ingrained perspectives and ways of life? What are the changes a manifestation of? It is of great importance to look at what part the women have played, in renewing or preserving older perspectives and ways of life.

In our days it is also important to examine how the many immigrants and their churches, Islam for instance, adjust to completely new conditions, for example in the way of dressing and concerning food prohibitions. What about alcohol, drugs etc.? How are the new religions, such as Islam, regarded and received by the established churches and by the man in the street, for example in connection with the building of Mosques which has been topical in Sweden? The Nordic countries and Europe are on their way to become multicultural on the religious level as well, in a completely different way than before.

One field of research which is suited for international comparisons through the SIEF, concerns the significance of religion in cultural meetings across borders of different kinds, and those conflicts and forms of cooperation that may arise. One can consider open conflicts in countries like the former Yugoslavia, or Northern Ireland. What role does religion have in that kind of contexts, alongside with for example ethnical and national factors?

Religion and politics do not have to be opposed as during the Soviet era, but may also be linked to each other. Christian political parties have on the one hand played an important part in both local politics and national politics in the western world, concerning presenting and realizing religiously founded convictions, and they still do. What does it mean that they also have, and have had governmental responsibility as in Norway at the end of the 1990s?

How is, on the other hand, the religion used as a tool in the struggle for political power between different population groups? One does only have to think about the antagonisms on Northern Ireland or in the Balkans. The ethnologist and folklorist Klaus ROTH from Munich has shown the negative political effect that the defeat of the Christian Serbs in Kosovo in 1389 against the Muslim ottomans has had concerning the political development and war situation in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The oral tradition about the war defeat in the 14th century has contributed to strengthening the will to war and conflict between the population groups several hundreds of years after the occurred events (ROTH 1994). What looks like religious antagonisms may in fact have a political motivation. The main interest for the folklorist is the role religion plays for common people within different groupings and not just within the political or religious elite.

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