Constructing
Local Theologies

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What Is Local Theology?

There has been an important shift in perspective in theology in recent years. While the basic purpose of theological reflection has remained the same—namely, the reflection of Christians upon the gospel in light of their own circumstances—much more attention is now being paid to how those circumstances shape the response to the gospel. This focus is being expressed with terms like "localization," "contextualization," "indigenization," and "inculturation" of theology. Despite slightly different nuances in meaning, all of these terms point to the need for and responsibility of Christians to make their response to the gospel as concrete and lively as possible.

This first chapter will wander over the terrain being staked out as of prime concern to this kind of theology and will explore some of the issues involved. Specifically, four broad questions will be pursued, with the hope of our getting to know the concerns of this kind of theology in more detail: (1) What has led to this shift in perspective in theology, and what issues are important to it? (2) What are some of the main approaches being taken? (3) Who is making these approaches? (4) How would one define this new perspective in light of other approaches in theology?

The purpose of this investigation is a synthetic one. In other words, rather than a region-by-region or country-by-country approach, we shall focus upon issues and concerns that have become common among a number of geographical areas. An analysis by region has already been taken up by others.[1]

A SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE

A shift in perspective, concentrating on the role that circumstances play in shaping one's response to the gospel, first became evident in regions wher Christianity was relatively new. It started coming to the world's attention in the 1950s in parts of Africa and Asia. There was a growing sense that the theologies being inherited from the older churches of the North Atlantic com munity did not fit well into these quite different cultural circumstances.

In Roman Catholic circles, the need to adapt theological reflection to local circumstances began receiving official support with Vatican Council II, where in the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity *Ad Gentes* such adaptation received explicit approbation. In the subsequent years the missionary theology of Pope Paul VI developed this thought, especially in his address to the bishops of Africa in 1969 and in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* in 1975.[2] The latter not only continued his own thought, but grew out of what he had heard in the Synod of Bishops devoted to the question of the mission of the church.

A similar movement was taking place in Protestant circles and was becoming evident by the early 1970s. Krikor Haleblian has chronicled the rise of this concern in and among Protestants.[3] Terms like "contextualization," "localization," "indigenization," "inculturation," and "adaptation" began to be used by Catholics and Protestants alike in referring to this shift in perspective.

At the same time another movement was also afoot, rooted especially in Latin America. By the time of the gathering of Roman Catholic bishops at Medellín in 1968, it was becoming known as "theology of liberation." The publication in English of a book of that title by Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez in 1973 helped to bring this approach to the world's attention.[4] The theology of liberation shared an important concern with the shift in perspective going on in Africa and Asia: an attempt to find a Christian voice in quite different circumstances from those more commonly known in Europe and North America. In all these instances, however the theology coming from them might be understood, there was that common concern: making sense of the Christian message in local circumstances. Specifically, three recurring concerns threaded their way through all the different theologies that were emerging in the southern hemispheres and among marginated peoples of Europe and North America.

First, *new questions* were being asked, questions for which there were no ready traditional answers. Indeed, so many new questions were emerging that the credibility of existing forms of theology was weakened. For example, questions about the eucharistic elements: How was one to celebrate the Eucharist in countries that were Muslim theocracies and forbade the production or importation of fermented beverages? What was one to do in those cultures where cereal products such as bread were not known, in which the unconsecrated bread itself became a magical object because of its foreignness? Or how was one to celebrate baptism among the Masai in East Africa, where to pour water on the head of a woman was to curse her with infertility? How was one to understand Vatican Council II's opening to non-Christian religions in countries in southern Asia where Christianity seemed destined to remain a minority religion?

How was one to understand church-state conflict in the repressive regimes of parts of Latin America, where the church was not a power equal to the state, but was now a church of the poor? Or what was one to do with the

discipline of celibacy among the clergy in cultures where not to marry and have children was a way of cursing one's parents? Or how was one to understand polygamy in rural Africa, where it seemed to be more a matter of economic security for women than a matter of male lust? Churches in cultural settings vastly different from those of traditional Christianity in the North Atlantic area were not only raising new questions, but asking questions that traditional frameworks of theology could not answer. It was becoming increasingly evident that the theologies once thought to have a universal, and even enduring or perennial character (such as neo-scholastic Thomism in Catholicism or neo-orthodoxy in Protestantism) were but regional expressions of certain cultures.

Second, *old answers* were being urged upon cultures and regions with new questions. People outside the North Atlantic communities felt that the older churches were not taking their questions seriously, or were trying to foist their own agenda upon them. They detected a continuing and consistent colonialism and paternalism on the part of the North Atlantic churches, which seemed to be insisting that, if they wished to be considered full-fledged Christian communities, they would have to come to think and respond like the older churches. The older churches, often the source of much of the financial support, and certainly held up as the mature Christian ideal, wittingly and unwittingly were imposing their problems and their solutions upon the newer churches. As recently as the Sixth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Vancouver in 1983 this was again evident: the North Atlantic churches' agenda was dominated by the question of peace and nuclear war, while that of the rest of the churches had to do with hunger, poverty, and political repression. Despite honest efforts to accommodate the agenda of the southern hemisphere, the agenda of the North Atlantic churches continued to have the upper hand in the proceedings.

The problem of old answers was also being felt in the North Atlantic churches. Blacks in the United States detected racism in the patterns of theological response traditional to much of Christianity. Women discovered widespread exclusion of their experience from the mainstream of Christian reflection. And many men and women in ministry found the theology they had learned inadequate to the questions that they now faced in their work. The pluralism that had come about in post-Enlightenment thought kept raising questions about the philosophical underpinnings deemed appropriate to Christian theology. Not only were there competing philosophical systems, but social and natural sciences were now giving more shape to the culture than any philosophy was. A deepening dissatisfaction with existing approaches to theology became more and more widespread.

Third, the realities of new questions and old answers pointed to a concern that recurred in churches around the world: *a new kind of Christian identity* was emerging apart from much of the traditional theological reflection of historical Christianity. The theology emerging out of this new identity had particular sensitivity to three areas: context, procedure, and history.

Rather than trying, in the first instance, to apply a received theology to a local context, this new kind of theology began with an examination of the context itself. In contexts where issues of oppression and conflict were paramount, a lengthy analysis of relationships of power and injustice was clearly called for. Social, economic, and political questions engaged the energies that had once been devoted to philosophical or metaphysical questions. It has gradually become unthinkable in many Christian churches to engage in any theological reflections without first studying the context in which it is taking place. Without such an initial analysis, a theology readily can become either irrelevant or a subtle tool of ideological manipulation. There is now a realization that all theologies have contexts, interests, relationships of power, special concerns—and to pretend that this is not the case is to be blind.

This awareness of how context shapes reflection, how it gives urgency to questions and shape to answers has led to greater attention to a second aspect of this new theology: procedure. In cultures where ideas emerge and decisions are made on a communal basis, one now sees theology developing in that same way. While the professionally trained theologian continues to have a role in relating the experience of other Christian communities to the experience of a local group, the community itself takes much more responsibility in shaping theological response. Much or even most of this theology never comes to be written down as it emerges from the reflection of those myriad small Christian communities in Latin America, the Philippines, or East Africa. But then ideals of individuality and publication again merely reflect certain cultural contexts and preferences. By the same token, in developed capitalist countries such as the United States where more individualist ideals prevail, autobiography or one's personal story has become an important procedural pathway for the development of a theology. Theological procedures, therefore, follow to a great extent the patterns of production of meaning within a given cultural context. What has counted for theology since the thirteenth century in Western Christianity has been dominated by a university model, with its emphasis on clarity, precision, and relation to other bodies of knowledge, about which more will be said in chapter 4. But other ways of engaging in theological reflection are available and are giving shape to how Christians understand themselves in their situations.

A third sensitivity in this new identity is to history. While the timeless and enduring realities of grace are not overlooked, special attention is given to all the ambiguities of history. Racial, economic, sexual, and ideological dominations of many types are never far from the awareness in this new identity. Histories of suffering cannot be forgotten. This is leading not only to a transformation of the present, but also to a reconstruction of our understanding of the past. Women in many churches are discovering both a hidden and forgotten history as well as one distorted to meet male interests.[5] Blacks in the United States and South Africa discover a church that condoned slavery on the basis of race. The poor discover a history of the rich, but find their own families consigned to anonymity. Rarely have Christian communi-

ties been more sensitive to the incarnate character of the church, in its moments of grace and abject sinfulness, in its times of prophetic witness and shameful betrayal. All of these factors have been combining to create an important shift in perspective in Christian self-awareness and theology, both among the churches in the southern hemisphere, and among the churches of the North Atlantic communities. But the newness of the approaches, coupled with the heightened sensitivities, raise many questions, some of which are the subject of this book.

The concerns begin with what to call this shift in perspective. A number of different terms are being used, somewhat interchangeably.

One of the first terms for this new perspective was *indigenous theology*, which emphasizes the fact that theology is done by and for a given geographical area—by local people for their area, rather than by outsiders. It aims at focusing upon the integrity and identity of the enterprise. It is contrasted with a universal or perennial theology, which attempts to speak for all places over a long period of time. The difficulty with this term, at least in some places, is the history of the word "indigenous." In those parts of the world that once made up the British empire, "indigenous" connotes the old policy of replacing British personnel in colonial government with local leadership. The term, therefore, has a distinctively colonialist ring in East Africa and in India and is unsuited to the new perspective in theology. The term continues to be used in other parts of the world, however.

In some evangelical Protestant circles the term *ethnotheology* was put forward, referring both to the biblical concept of *ta ethnē* (the nations) and to parallel usages in European social sciences (ethnopsychology, ethnopsychiatry, etc.). While the term does help to focus upon the specificity of theology for a given cultural area, it also carries for many ears a slightly unsavory ring. The biblical allusion connotes for some a reference to pagans or the heathen somehow inferior to the chosen people. The social-science reference suggests that this kind of theology is somehow different from (and probably inferior to) the theology done for Western churches, much as "sociology" is done in technologically advanced cultures, while only "cultural anthropology" is done in less advanced cultures. The term "ethnotheology" has not received widespread acceptance.

Inculturation, as a noun, is often used of this shift in theological process as well. A combination of the theological principle of incarnation with the social-science concept of acculturation (adapting oneself to a culture), the term has come to be used widely in Roman Catholic circles and appears in many documents of congresses and episcopal conferences. It refers to the wider process of which theology is an expression. While widely accepted in church circles, it causes some difficulties in dialogue with social scientists in that it seems to be a dilettantish kind of neologism on the part of non scientists.[6] When referring specifically to theology, it has no accepted adjectival form.

Contextual theology is a widely used term for this shift in perspective

focusing especially on the role of context in this kind of theology. As a neologism, it has the advantage of not having many previous associations and of being readily used in translation into a wide variety of languages.

Local theology reflects especially English-language usage, emphasizing the circumscribed context of the logical reflection and having also some ecclesial overtones through its association with "local church," the most common form of English translation for Vatican Council II's *ecclesia particularis.* Its principal disadvantage is that the use of the word "local" does not translate well into Germanic languages, where *lokal* has a much different meaning.

The lack of consistent terminology, the need for neologisms, and the problem of conflicting connotations suggest something of the state of this shift in theological reflection. It is still new; many of the problems involved have not yet been thought through; and there is still no consensus about some basic and important issues.

Throughout this book the term "local theology" will be the one used most commonly. While this does present certain problems in translation, there are advantages to recommend it. First, it allows the overtone of the "local church" to be sounded. Second, as we shall see, not all attempts in theology are equally sensitive to the context; indeed, they can take quite different approaches to it. This allows keeping the term "contextual" for those theologies that show greater sensitivity to context. And finally, it avoids undue use of neologisms.

THE VARIETIES OF LOCAL THEOLOGY

In the large number of theological reflections now available to wider audiences (not even beginning to take into account those that are never written down or published), one can easily become disheartened about how to approach them, let alone engage in some kind of evaluation. What follows is an attempt to provide one kind of way of looking at the variety of local theologies emerging. Different classifying principles could be used. The one employed here rests upon how each approach relates to its cultural context.

Three broad categories or types are suggested here: translation, adaptation, and contextual approaches. These approaches suggest not only a relation between a cultural context and theology, but also something about the relation between theology and the community in which it takes place.

TRANSLATION MODELS

The three approaches just suggested can be understood as models for engaging in local theology, a concept now familiar in theological circles.[7] "Model" suggests not only a procedure for engaging in theological reflection, but also some specific interests or principles that help to guide the use of the procedure.

The most common model for local theology has been what could be called

a translation model, which sees the task of local theology as one that calls for a two-step procedure. In the first step, one frees the Christian message a much as possible from its previous cultural accretions. In so doing, the dat of revelation are allowed to stand freely and be prepared for the second step of the procedure, namely, translation into a new situation. An underlying image directing this procedure is one of kernel and husk: the basic Christian revelation is the kernel; the previous cultural settings in which it has been incarnated constitute the husk. The kernel has to be hulled time and again, a it were, to allow it to be translated into new cultural contexts.

The translation model has often been utilized in Christian history. In the past century in Europe and North America, from Harnack onward, one has heard calls for the "de-Hellenization" of Western Christianity, by which is meant a removal of Greek categories from the biblical revelation. The guide lines for liturgical renewal among Roman Catholics following the Vatican Council are directed by a translation approach: taking the basic Roman liturgy and adapting it to local custom in those matters not deemed "essential" to the rites. In many Protestant settings, the continuing efforts to remain faithful to biblical teaching have prompted the use of translation models in new and different settings.

Notable among these has been the "dynamic-equivalence" method of Bible translation, whereby biblical imagery is first translated into concepts, the equivalents of which are then sought in the local language. These concepts are then translated into imagery specific to the culture. For example, in culture that do not know sheep or shepherds, an attempt is made to discern the theological concepts conveyed by the sheep imagery, in order to find out how the same concepts might be conveyed in the new culture, albeit with different imagery. Charles Kraft has suggested that the dynamic-equivalence approach might be extended beyond Bible translation to become a theological procedure.[8]

Translation models are generally the first kind of model to be used in pastoral settings, because pastoral urgency demands some kind of adaptation to local circumstances in ritual, in catechesis, and in the rendering of significant texts into local languages. The basic principle behind the translation model would begin with the church tradition and adapt it to a local cultural setting It calls in many ways for more familiarity with what has been done in the church tradition than what is done in the local cultural setting. For that reason it can be done by persons foreign to the local setting, thereby allowing for some initial missionary adaptation to the local culture. Older forms and music can be adapted to accommodate or include local custom and music in liturgy; linguistic equivalents for great theological categories (grace, salvation, sin, justification) can be sought in local languages. An immediate and pressing pastoral need is met, whereby Christianity is allowed to be incarnated in some measure in the local context.

But while translation models provide for some immediate adaptation to local circumstances, they manifest two major weaknesses, which gradually

become more evident over the longer term. Both of these models have to do with how these models understand culture.

The first of these two major weaknesses is a positivist understanding of culture. This approach assumes that patterns in a culture are quickly decoded and understood by foreigners. Thus in making decisions about translation, the missionary, the theologian, the liturgist, the Bible translator do a cultural analysis to a given point, but thereafter it comes to an end. Cultural analysis is done not on the terms of the culture investigated, but only to find parallels with patterns in previously contextualized Christianity. Questions are rarely asked as to whether there really are such parallels, whether the parallels have the same place of significance in the new culture, or whether other more significant patterns might better be drawn upon. More attention is given to the surface patterns of a culture than to its deeper meanings or to the inter-connections between different cultural patterns.

For example, after the call to renewal in liturgy among Roman Catholics, some expatriate pastors in Zambia decided to use drums rather than bells for summoning the people to services, since bells were considered European accretions. They met great resistance among local people, since the drums which they used were associated with particularly erotic dances in the minds of the local Christians. Thus, while the principle of drums rather than bells may have been a good one, the cultural analysis did not go far enough to reveal another important set of meanings.

What this points out is the importance of taking the culture much more seriously than is the case in translation models. The translation model assumes that there is a direct equivalent in the local culture for the cultural pattern coming from another church setting.

The second major weakness of the translation approach is the underlying kernel-and-husk theory. It assumes, ultimately, that biblical revelation, conciliar pronouncement, or magisterial statement occurs in some privileged, supracultural sphere, which allows for immediate translation into any given culture. Rarely, however, is any information given in such a cultural vacuum. A closer examination would show that kernel and cultural husk are given together, even in the Bible, and they come to have a profound effect on each other over a period of time. Rather than the kernel-and-husk image of an incarnate Christianity, which allows for a ready hulling to reveal the kernel of divine revelation, perhaps the image of an onion would be more appropriate: the kernel and husk are intimately bound together.

Many theological problems, when pursued, reveal this dilemma. Mention was made above of the common eucharistic problem: Do bread and wine constitute essentials (kernel) or accidentals (husk) in the celebration of the Eucharist? Different Christian groups are answering this question in different ways. If one takes one line of analysis, the Lord Jesus Christ took the staples of his culture and sanctified them; we, in turn, should do the same with the staples in the respective cultures. Many protestant denominations have followed this line. On the other hand, the Eucharist is the prime symbol of Christian unity; hence the elements that make that union possible should be the same everywhere. And historically, divergence from the use of those elements (e.g., the use of water instead of wine by some early Gnostic sects) has been found only among heterodox groups. Following this line of analysis, the elements of bread and wine should be the same everywhere. This line of analysis has been pursued in official Roman Catholic circles.

How is one to decide? And equally important, who is to decide? The strength of the translation model is its concern to remain faithful to the received tradition of Christian faith. But without a more fundamental encounter with the new culture, that faith can never become incarnate. It remains an alien voice within the culture. It needs to engage in a more fundamental encounter between Christianity as it has been elsewhere, and the culture in question.

A more fundamental encounter takes a good deal of time, and often pastoral urgency does not permit that luxury. Translation approaches are often necessary in the first instance. But in the long run, such a local theology can be called contextual only in a limited sense.

ADAPTATION MODELS

A second kind of approach is found in what might be called adaptation models. These models realize some of the difficulties and long-term weaknesses of the translation models, and seek a more fundamental encounter between Christianity and culture.

Often the adaptation models appear in a second stage of development of a local theology. They try to take the local culture much more seriously. There are three adaptation models that are used quite commonly.

In the first model, expatriates in consort with local leaders will try to develop an explicit philosophy or picture of the world-view of the culture. This picture that develops will be parallel either to philosophical models or to cultural anthropological descriptions used in Western theologies as a basis for developing a theology. Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*, first published in 1944 from his experience in the Belgian Congo, is an early and good example of this approach. In this book Tempels takes the then prevalent Neo-Thomistic philosophical framework and redevelops it with equivalent categories from Bantu peoples. The understanding was that this could form the basis for a sub-Saharan Christian theology much as Neo-Thomism had formed the basis for a European theology.[9]

In subsequent years this method was refined. In some places (this has happened in southern Peru and in northern Papua New Guinea[10]) local leaders are trained to use Western categories to give expression to the factors shaping the world-view of their people. In some instances (this has happened among an Amazonian people in Bolivia) the local leaders felt that this helped them to come to understand their own culture more profoundly.[11] In other instances local leaders are trained in Western educational centers and themselves set

about creating such philosophical models, drawing upon local cultural materials. The early work of Tanzanian theologian Charles Nyamiti is an example of this. He called for the use of local materials to construct a philosophical system parallel to those Neo-Thomist ones he had learned at the University of Louvain.[12]

This kind of adaptation approach has some obvious strengths. Especially when wielded in the hands of local leaders, it can quickly help to achieve the twin goals of some authenticity in the local culture and respectability in Western church circles. The theology that emerges from such a model is replete with the categories, names, and concerns of a local culture, yet looks like Western theology and is relatively easily understood by Westerners. Moreover, it makes dialogue between North Atlantic and other churches much easier, since fundamentally similar frameworks are in use. It can give younger churches a sense of equal status with the older, more established churches.

But the weaknesses begin to appear as well. The basic problem is this: the adaptation model presented here presumes a method in theology whereby an articulated philosophical foundation forms the basis for a systematic theology. This method of understanding what constitutes genuine theology derives from the thirteenth century in the West, and as such has been an important though limited approach to Christian theology. It is a theology addressed principally to the academy. However, church and academy are not coextensive institutions, serving the same communities. While such a theology presents particular strengths in dealing with problems such as secularization, science and religion, and the relation of theology to other forms of knowledge, it has difficulty explaining the role of local communities in theological process. This is probably why so many local leaders continue to experience difficulty in trying to elicit a theology from a community; we have either forgotten how or find the results to be "unscientific," that is, not yielding the kind of sure knowledge we are used to seeking.

Thus this adaptation approach does take the culture more seriously than do translation approaches, but often will try to force cultural data into foreign categories. Many Asian cultures can deal with contradictory data in a conjunctive (both/and) fashion that to Westerners, with their disjunctive (either/or) modes of thought, seems dangerously relativistic. Must Asia bow to these Western considerations? The problems of this kind of adaptation approach are found most often among Roman Catholics who, perhaps more than most Protestants, have relied on explicit philosophical frameworks. The parallel problem in Protestant (especially Calvinist) communities is the concept of the "New Testament church" as the fundamental philosophical framework. Contemporary biblical exegesis has shown that there is no uniform New Testament church, except in the minds of later Christians. The New Testament reveals to us a variety of different kinds of communities, animated by different christologies and engaging in a variety of church orders. While such a biblical approach assures a greater fidelity to New Tes-

tament witnesses, how that New Testament church is understood often owes more to twentieth-century (or sixteenth-century) Christianity than to the first-century variety. It also assumes that the New Testament somehow itself stands above culture, and does not witness to differing cultural settings in the Mediterranean basin of the first century.

There is a third kind of adaptation approach, which does not rely on philosophical models from the West, or upon Reformation concepts about the early church. Pope Paul VI, in an address to the African bishops assembled in Kampala, Uganda, in 1969 eloquently and succinctly presented this kind of adaptation approach:

The expression, that is, the language and mode of manifesting this one Faith, may be manifold; hence, it may be original, suited to the tongue, the style, the genius, and the culture, of the one who professes this one Faith. From this point of view, a certain pluralism is not only legitimate, but desirable. An adaptation of the Christian life in the fields of pastoral, ritual, didactic and spiritual activities is not only possible, it is even favoured by the Church. The liturgical renewal is a living example of this. And in this sense you may, and you must, have an African Christianity. Indeed, you possess human values and characteristic forms of culture which can rise up to perfection such as to find in Christianity, and for Christianity, a true superior fulness, and prove to be capable of a richness of expression all its own, and genuinely African. This may take time. It will require that your African soul become imbued to its depths with the secret charisms of Christianity, so that these charisms may then overflow freely, in beauty and wisdom, in the true African manner.[13]

Vincent Donovan, in his account of evangelization efforts among the Masai in East Africa, makes something of the same point.[14] Here the approach is not one of taking a philosophical framework as a grid for understanding another culture, but a different kind of adaptation approach. Here the method is one of planting the seed of faith and allowing it to interact with the native soil, leading to a new flowering of Christianity, faithful both to the local culture and to the apostolic faith. Paul VI and Donovan would no doubt have seen the process happening somewhat differently, but the fundamental principle is the same.

The obvious strength of this approach is that it takes the local culture, with its own categories, much more seriously than any of the other approaches examined thus far. It is willing to take the time needed to permit this kind of development. It tries to respect both the integrity of the apostolic tradition and the traditions of the local culture. In ideal circumstances it should allow for the development of a theology that is not only local, but deeply contextual.

The weakness of this kind of adaptation approach is that rarely, if ever, are

those ideal circumstances present. Except in those instances where there has never been any contact with Christians, certain patterns of Christianity are already lodged in the culture, for better or for worse. Over a period of time some of these cultural patterns have come to be associated with the fundamentals of Christianity. Thus the only place where one can see the Tridentine Mass still celebrated on a widespread basis is in the cities of the People's Republic of China. Latin hymnody is more readily heard today in Nigeria than in its home in western Europe. Moreover, rarely are Christians living in such isolated circumstances that such a development can come about without conflicting elements from both inside and outside the culture. Worldwide communication has invaded all but the most isolated of cultures. An image repeated in many cultures of the world comes from Latin America: an elderly Quechua man, riding along on his donkey on a trail in northern Peru, with a transistor radio clasped to his ear. He does not understand the Spanish being broadcast, but the noises and the status of having such a contraption are changing his life. Even within a culture, the ideal circumstances assume that there is never a coercive exercise of power whereby pathways of meaning come to be determined. And this is not only a problem in churches with centralized authority. Those in free-church traditions in Protestant Christianity know that, even without the centralized authority of Roman Catholic Christianity, local members of a community will come to exercise power by seizing it.

This model presents an ideal that is almost always skewed by human circumstances. It assumes that the Holy Spirit works in a community in ways basically disengaged from normal human events. It has a stronger theology of unfettered grace than of human sin.

With this adaptation model, we are coming close to the third set of models that we wish to consider, the contextual models. As will become evident, these models share much with this last kind of adaptation model, but try to address more directly the interaction between received apostolic faith and traditions of culture.

CONTEXTUAL MODELS

The third set of models to be investigated here shows a close relation to the adaptation models especially. The differences are more subtle than those between translation and adaptation models. The contextual models, as the name implies, concentrate more directly on the cultural context in which Christianity takes root and receives expression. Whereas the adaptation models continue to emphasize somewhat more the received faith, contextual models begin their reflection with the cultural context. Contextual models are seen increasingly as embodying the ideals of what local theology is to be about, even though the working out of those ideals often proves difficult in the practice.

Two kinds of contextual models will be examined here. They differ princi-

pally in how they read the dynamics and dominant needs of their social contexts. In terms of dynamics, both models recognize that almost all cultures in the world undergo continuing social change. To base a local theology entirely upon patterns in traditional religion found in rural West Africa or in the island cultures of the South Pacific ignores some basic facts: the world population is becoming more and more urban. The median age of most of the world's population is less than twenty. These two factors of urbanization and youthful population indicate that much of that traditional religion and culture is being forgotten or not even learned. In many areas of the world, cultures are not only subjected to rapid social change due to technology and urbanization, but are also subjected to oppression, poverty, and hunger. Change is not only rapid, it is oppressive and dehumanizing.

The two kinds of contextual models to be considered here emphasize either one or the other of these basic social factors. Those concerned with cultural identity have been called (at least in Africa and among the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians) "ethnographic approaches"; those concentrating on oppression and social ills, the need for social change, "liberation approaches."

If the social concerns of human communities can be grouped around concerns for identity and for social change, the ethnographic approaches are particularly concerned with identity. They often become evident in the final stages of colonialism or in the reassertion of an identity and dignity that has been denied them. Négritude in western Africa, Black Power in the United States and southern Africa, la raza among Chicanos in the United States—all are examples of the need to reconstruct an identity that has been denied or considered inferior. Issues of identity are not always on racial lines; women around the world are struggling to understand themselves in their own right, and not be satisfied with the identity given them by men. In countries until recently controlled by North Atlantic nations, the need to forge nationhood out of diverse peoples, to create supratribal identities and loyalties has also been a task for this kind of theology. And finally, maintaining some semblance of traditional family connection and ritual in the midst of dislocation, for refugees or for newly urbanized peoples, becomes the paramount task in many areas.

The difference between these concerns and those of the adaptation approaches is that a local theology begins with the needs of a people in a concrete place, and from there moves to the traditions of faith. How is a Haitian refugee to live in New York City? Or a Croatian immigrant worker in Berlin? How will an Amazonian Indian live in the favelas of São Paulo? And what will those left behind in villages in the New Guinea highlands do as their children migrate to Port Moresby? Local theologies of the ethnographic variety of contextual approach strive to answer questions of identity, especially. Their particular strength lies in beginning with the questions that the people themselves have—not those posed immediately by other Christian churches or those necessary for a systematic understanding of faith. In other words,

they try to initiate a dialogue with Christian tradition whereby that tradition can address questions genuinely posed by the local circumstances, rather than only those questions that the Christian tradition has treated in the past. The small Christian community movement has been a vehicle in many parts of the world for this theological reflection leading to a theology enhancing the identity of a local community.

What are the weaknesses of the ethnographic approach? A number can be mentioned. First, the development of a contextual local theology is often set out as a project, but even more often not carried beyond the first couple of steps. Thus problems may be identified, questions may be addressed to the Christian faith as found in other cultural traditions, but there has not been time to continue the dialogue. Second, the ethnographic approach, in its concern with identity and stability, can often overlook the conflictual factors in its environment for the sake of maintaining harmony and peace. It can become a conservative force in situations where change is called for. Third, in its close analysis of traditional factors shaping the life of a culture, the ethnographic approach can become prey to a cultural romanticism, unable to see the sin in its own historical experience. It cannot remain outside the often vigorous dialogue that needs to take place with gospel values as they have been experienced in other cultures. Dealing with this problem can create enormous difficulties. For example, the taking of the heads of one's enemies in battle provided much of the bonding symbolism among the Asmat people in Irian Jaya. When this was forbidden, the culture disintegrated rapidly. How does one deal with a situation wherein the principles maintaining the integrity of the culture come into what seems to be direct conflict with the gospel? Fourth, inasmuch as good and workable models of cultural analysis are still being developed, much of the cultural analysis can now be done only by experts, thereby excluding to a great extent precisely those who need to be involved in the process: the communities themselves.

These weaknesses of the ethnographic approach appear to be formidable. Some of them have emerged out of the struggle to create a contextual and a local theology along lines of identity. Yet when a close working dialectic between gospel traditions and local cultural traditions is maintained, many of these difficulties can be overcome. No other approach takes the problems of identity as seriously as does the ethnographic approach. In view of its great importance for human community, it remains an important form of local theology.

Liberation approaches, on the other hand, concentrate especially upon the dynamics of social change in human societies. In view of the fact that so many cultures are being subjected to social change, or are being denied necessary change through patterns of political, economic, and social oppression, it is not surprising that liberation approaches are probably the most common form of contextual model in the world today. They are associated especially with Latin America, but they can be found wherever Christians are experiencing political, economic, and social oppression. The focus or emphasis

may be different from region to region, but certain of the dynamics are parallel.

If ethnographic models look to issues of identity and continuity, liberation models concentrate on social change and discontinuity. Put theologically, liberation models are keenly concerned with salvation. Liberation models analyze the lived experience of a people to uncover the forces of oppression, struggle, violence, and power. They concentrate on the conflictual elements oppressing a community or tearing it apart. In the midst of grinding poverty, political violence, deprivation of rights, discrimination, and hunger, Christians move from social analysis to finding echoes in the biblical witness in order to understand the struggle in which they are engaged or to find direction for the future. Liberation models concentrate on the need for change.

So much has been written about liberation theology that it need not be set out in detail here. Even more of what is important about liberation models never appears in print. It remains in the songs, in the Bible reflection groups, in the hearts of oppressed people. The special strength of liberation models has been what can happen when the realities of a people are genuinely and intimately coupled with the saving word of God. The energies that are released, the bonds of community and of hope that are forged, the insight into the divine revelation received and shared have already enriched the larger Christian community immensely and have challenged the older churches to a more faithful witness.

As in any model, there are shortcomings evident in the liberation approaches as well. Often they are better at hearing the cries of the people than at listening to the biblical witness or to the testimonies of other churches. The problem of one of the most powerful tools for social analysis, the Marxist model, being so directly tied to antireligious and oppressive societies historically, has not yet been adequately resolved. The early disdain for the religion of the people, often seen as superstitious and enslaving, has been gradually resolved. The possibility of reflecting only after action has been taken, rather than making reflection a basis for action, remains an abiding temptation. The too close concentration on ill and the inability to see intermediate manifestations of grace can also be a problem. Safeguarding the intensity of struggle from the pitfalls of a fanatic apocalypticism becomes problematic in desperate situations, often with the result that armed violence comes to pose itself as the only answer.

The potential shortcomings of liberation approaches are well known and have been documented by liberation theology's friends and by its opponents. But to note shortcomings alongside strengths of any human undertaking is simply to be realistic. Liberation theologies are a major force, if not the major force, in contextual models of theologies today. Their ability to speak the language of Christian communities attests to their power and importance.

In summary, a diverse number of models can be grouped together as attempts at constructing local theologies: translation models, adaptation

models, contextual models, and some adaptation models are concerned in the first instance with the transmission of faith; some adaptation models and the contextual models are concerned in the first instance with the context into which the apostolic faith is received. Given the circumstances in which a community finds itself, one or other model may be the more useful at a given time. My own reading would suggest, however, that contextual models are the most important and enduring in the long run. It will be on those models that the rest of this book concentrates. Translation and adaptation models raise important theological questions as well; but all of these questions eventually come together in a consideration of contextual models.

With this, we turn to another question important for a preliminary consideration of local theologies: Who is engaged in developing local theologies? This is an important question because the author of a theology says something about the nature and purpose of that theology. Out of this should emerge a working definition of local theology that will take into account the concerns of a genuinely contextual theology.

WHO IS A LOCAL THEOLOGIAN?

The theology that is emerging out of new contexts is engaging the energies of more than professional theologians. Liberation theologies in particular emphasize the role of the entire believing community in the development of a local theology. This same movement, however, has been raising questions about precisely who it is that brings about the development of a local theology. Behind that question lurks a second concern, namely, what are we to call theology itself? This section surveys some of the issues involved with these questions.

THE COMMUNITY AS THEOLOGIAN

The experience of those in the small Christian communities who have seen the insight and the power arising from the reflections of the people upon their experience and the Scriptures has prompted making the community itself the prime author of theology in local contexts. The Holy Spirit, working in and through the believing community, gives shape and expression to Christian experience. Some of these communities have taught us to read the Scriptures in a fresh way and have called the larger church back to a fidelity to the prophetic word of God. What happened over a period of years to the fishing village of Solentiname in Nicaragua is one of the best-known examples of this.[15]

The role of the community in developing theology reminds us also for whom theology is, in the first instance, intended: the community itself, to enhance its own self-understanding. The experience of the development of this kind of theology, especially in liberation models, has prompted others to

define theology as the emancipatory praxis freeing an oppressed people. Theology then becomes more than words; it becomes also a pedagogical process liberating consciousness and inciting to action.

If one considers the concrete situation and the expression of faith in situations of oppression, it is hard not to agree with such a contention about the community as author of local theology. Theology is certainly intended for a community and is not meant to remain the property of a theologian class. The expression of faith in theology should make a difference in people's lives; otherwise it is a mere beating of the air. Reflection for its own sake may lead to contemplation, but contemplation should lead to action as well.

Understanding the role of the community in the development of theology shows how the poor become the subjects of their own history. It allows us to understand the special preference the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ, has had for the poor in their understanding of the Good News. Through the activity of those communities of the poor on virtually every continent, the whole Christian church has been profoundly enriched.

Any conception of what is local theology and who brings it about needs to be carefully balanced with a variety of factors. Not everything any community says or does can be called theology: otherwise theology itself becomes an empty concept. The emphasis on the role of the community as theologian has been an important one in correcting the idea that only professional theologians could engage in theological reflection.

In many instances it is helpful to make a distinction between the role of the whole community of faith, whose experience is the indispensable source of theology, and whose acceptance of a theology is an important guarantor of its authenticity, and the role of smaller groups within the community who actually give shape to that theology. In other words, the role of the whole community is often one of raising the questions, of providing the experience of having lived with those questions and struggled with different answers, and of recognizing which solutions are indeed genuine, authentic, and commensurate with their experience. The poet, the prophet, the teacher, those experienced with other communities may be among those who give leadership to the actual shaping into words of the response in faith. Gifted individuals, within the community and working on its behalf, give shape to the response, which then in turn is accepted or not by the community. Looked at in this way, local theologies can thereby more easily avoid the romanticist fallacy, common among folklorists of the early nineteenth century, who saw whole communities actually composing folk songs and epics. More recent research into oral traditions indicates that it is individuals capturing the spirit of those communities who do the actual shaping.[16] This does not play down the important role of those communities; it only puts it in a clearer context.

In sum, then, the community is a key source for theology's development and expressions, but to call it a theologian in the narrow sense of authorship is inaccurate. Significant members within the community, often working as a group, give voice to the theology of the community. Being a theologian is a

gift, requiring a sensitivity to the context, an extraordinary capacity to listen, and an immersion in the Scriptures and the experience of other churches. It remains with the community, however, not only to initiate the theological process, but also to rejoin the process of theology in the act traditionally known as reception.[17]

THE ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL THEOLOGIAN

Ordinarily, when one asks the question of who engages in theology, it is the professionally trained theologian who comes to mind. Such a person, schooled in the traditions of a faith community, provides a unique and privileged resource for the shaping of the experience of a believing community.

The problem has been, however, that the requirements of time and energy for immersing oneself in those traditions have often led to a separation of the theologian from the experience of living communities. This problem becomes a hard one for a community to challenge because of the extensive knowledge a theologian needs of Scripture and subsequent Christian tradition, which takes years to develop and is in need of constant upgrading. Yet communities have instinctively felt that such isolation ultimately did not serve the purposes for which theology was intended. How is one to understand the role of the professional theologian in the development of local theologies?

To ignore the resources of the professional theologian is to prefer ignorance over knowledge. But to allow the professional theologian to dominate the development of a local theology seems to introduce a new hegemony into often already oppressed communities. In the development of local theologies, the professional theologian serves as an important resource, helping the community to clarify its own experience and to relate it to the experience of other communities past and present. Thus the professional theologian has an indispensable but limited role. The theologian cannot create a theology in isolation from the community's experience; but the community has need of the theologian's knowledge to ground its own experience within the Christian traditions of faith. In so doing, the theologian helps to create the bonds of mutual accountability between local and world church.

PROPHETS AND POETS IN LOCAL THEOLOGY

What about the prophetic dimension of the experience of a Christian community? Does not the voice of the prophet suffice for giving expression to the gospel in the community? When one hears the songs, reads the pamphlets, and witnesses the testimony of struggling Christians around the planet, one can honestly wonder whether or not more need be done by way of theology. Is not the voice of the prophet and the praxis of the prophetic community all we need?

The poets in the community, who can capture the rhythm and contour of the community's experience—cannot their work be considered a genuine lo-

cal theology? Is not some of the more authentic theology, especially that which captures the imagination of the majority of people, to be found in their work rather than in theological monographs or church documents? What role does the poet play in capturing the soul of a community?

Both prophets and poets are essential to the theological process, but that role does not reduce to either one of them. Prophecy is often the beginning of theology, and it often exercises judgment on a theology that has developed or been accepted by a community. The poet has the task of capturing those symbols and metaphors which best give expression to the experience of a community. Because a theology is not simply any experience of a community, but that experience of believers coming into encounter with the Scriptures and the authentic experiences of other believing communities, past and present, more is needed. Theology and prophecy are not entirely the same thing. The task of a theology is to expand a prophetic insight in order to engage the full range of issues. Prophetic calls to faithfulness must be tested also on the touchstone of other churches' experience of the Spirit. By the same token, the validity of poetic insight has to be tested on more than aesthetic criteria or resonance with a community's experience. Were a community incapable of sin, this would not have to be the case.

All of this, again, is not to play down the role of the prophet or the poet. Rather, it is meant to help situate their tasks within the larger theological process.

OUTSIDERS AND INSIDERS IN LOCAL THEOLOGY

The intense experience of communities often leads them to question the role of outsiders in the shaping of their theologies. In many parts of the world, expatriates have for too long dominated local communities, keeping them (often unwittingly) in a dependent position. Anyone who has worked in another culture knows that parts of that culture will always remain mysterious. One can never know that culture as one does one's own. This has led many cross-cultural ministers to step back from the theological process in local communities, or to be asked to do so by those communities.

Despite the obvious and real problems of paternalism and colonialism, which have frequently marked the expatriate's presence in a culture, the expatriate's role in the development of local theologies has often been quite significant. One wonders if the liberation theologies and the small Christian communities could have developed as rapidly in Latin America without the help of those foreign religious leaders. The expatriate can also be the bearer of the lived experience of other communities, experience that can challenge and enrich a local community. Without the presence of outside experience, a local church runs the risk of turning in on itself, becoming self-satisfied with its own achievements. The expatriate, as an outsider, can sometimes hear things going on in a community not heard by a native member of that community.

In the same way, being a life-long member of a local community does not guarantee insight. One of the disappointments in many local communities has been that having locally born leadership does not guarantee its effectiveness. And local leadership with experience elsewhere often can disdain its own roots and become more oppressive than outsiders. This has sometimes happened with leadership educated outside the local context to the ideals of North Atlantic cultures.

Again, both the insider and the outsider are needed, but they need to be situated within a larger process. What all of this shows is that the task of the development of local theology cannot be committed to one individual or even to one group. The experience of a community can remain amorphous without spokespersons in the prophet and the poet. Yet there is no prophet or poet without a community. The professional theologian can provide essential links to the larger Christian tradition; but local theology has to be more than a mere repetition of that tradition. Outsiders bring important experience, but by themselves can come to exercise hegemony over the community. A rootedness in the community is essential for a local theology, but does not in itself guarantee insight.

All of this underlines how much the theology emerging in local contexts is a communal enterprise. It takes the work of many individuals and groups to be truly effective. This look at some of the individuals and groups is intended to help situate the various roles within that communal undertaking. It helps also to see how complex the development of local theologies is likely to be.

TOWARD DEFINITION OF LOCAL THEOLOGY

In light of all the things just discussed, is it possible to define more exactly just what is local theology? Obviously it is a complex process, aware of contexts, of histories, of the role of experience, of the need to encounter the traditions of faith in other believing communities. It is also obvious that contexts are complex, that histories can be variously read, that experience can be ambiguous, that the encounter in faith is often dimly understood.

But how do all of these factors interact? I would suggest that their relationship be seen as a dialectical one, using the notion of dialectic in a broad sense. Dialectic is to be understood as a continuing attention to first one factor, and then another, leading to an ever-expanding awareness of the role and interaction of each of these factors.

These factors can be seen as roots feeding the development and growth of a local theology. They must interact to produce the full and living reality. The three principal roots beneath the growth of local theology are gospel, church, and culture.

"Gospel" here means the Good News of Jesus Christ and the salvation that God has wrought through him. This includes, and reaches beyond, the proclamation of the Scriptures. This includes the worshiping context of the local community and the presence of its Lord there. It includes those aspects

of the praxis of the community announcing the Good News. It includes that Word which missionaries find already active in the culture upon their arrival. It refers to the living presence of the saving Lord that is the foundation of the community, the spirit of the risen Lord guiding that community, the prophetic Spirit challenging the culture and the larger church.

But the gospel does not fall from the sky. Our faith is also a *fides ex auditu*, a faith we have heard from others. The gospel is always incarnate, incarnate in the reality of those who bring it to us, and incarnate in those who help us nurture the beginnings of faith. Church is a complex of those cultural patterns in which the gospel has taken on flesh, at once enmeshed in the local situation, extending through communities in our own time and in the past, and reaching out to the eschatological realization of the fullness of God's reign. Thus there is no local theology without the larger church, that concrete community of Christians, united through word and sacrament in the one Lord. The gospel without church does not come to its full realization; the church without gospel is a dead letter. Without church there is no integral incarnation of the gospel.

Culture is the concrete context in which this happens. It represents a way of life for a given time and place, replete with values, symbols, and meanings, reaching out with hopes and dreams, often struggling for a better world. Without a sensitivity to the cultural context, a church and its theology either become a vehicle for outside domination or lapse into docetism, as though its Lord never became flesh.

It takes the dynamic interaction of all three of these roots—gospel, church, culture—with all they entail about identity and change, to have the makings of local theology. Both living spirit and the network of traditions that make up living communities need to be taken into account. How this interaction of gospel, church, and culture takes place will be the subject of the next chapter.

2

Mapping A Local Theology

The previous chapter set out some of the questions that arise around the shift in perspective that has been going on in theology. This chapter continues that discussion, focusing more upon the relationships among some of the factors involved in the development of local theology.

Local theology was defined in the previous chapter as the dynamic interaction among gospel, church, and culture. That dynamic interaction was seen to be a dialectical one, moving back and forth among the various aspects of gospel, church, and culture. That movement raises questions that need to be addressed if local theology is to become an authentic and compelling voice in local churches.

The *gospel* raises questions about the community context. What is the quality of the community's praxis, its worship, its other forms of action? Who speaks for the community and brings its response to the gospel? We saw that such a bringing to expression needs different actors involved in the theological process: the action and experience of the community itself; the prophet's sensitivity to the challenge of the gospel and the community itself; the prophet's sensitivity to the experience of the community; the professional theologian's knowledge of the experience of other churches; and the unique perspectives of both insiders and outsiders. All of these, guided by the presence of the Spirit within the community, need to come together for the Good News to be truly alive in the community.

The *church* raises questions about the relation of the local church to other churches, for instance, how does the local church interact with the experience of other Christian communities past and present? Put another way, the question of tradition is being raised here. While the sensitivity to the community-based nature of theology, rooted in concrete circumstances, is a hallmark of local theology, one must at the same time relate this to the larger circumstances of the church. Questions about the ascertaining of Christian identity, the normativeness of the Scriptures and subsequent Christian history, issues of orthodoxy—all must be faced in some theory of tradition, in order to test,

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affirm, and challenge the authenticity of the local church's response.

Gospel and church find themselves interacting within *culture*, the third root feeding into local theology. Questions both of identity and of social change come quickly to the fore: What is unique in this cultural configuration, and where is it to be located within the streams of social change? One has to have a way of perceiving culture, how it reacts to traditions both inside and coming from outside the culture, what are the resources for innovation and conservation, for coping with change and adjudicating dissonances arising from that change.

There is more than one set of answers possible to each of the questions arising from this interaction of gospel, church, and culture. Concrete circumstances may dictate one set of answers as being more helpful than another. This chapter will try to give attention in a broad fashion to the nature of those relationships among gospel, church, and culture. Subsequent chapters then take up some of the individual questions, about developing theories of culture and church tradition, as well as issues arising from the encounter of culture and church.

The way of giving attention to these relationships will be to present a map charting their interactions. A map is not a recipe for successfully confecting local theology. To present such a recipe would presume that there was but one way to do it and, therefore, one paradigmatic set of cultural circumstances from which all other societies and cultures could be derived. A map functions in a somewhat different fashion. Its purpose is to allow anyone engaged in the development of local theologies to locate where his or her work stands relative to the entire enterprise. As we shall see, circumstances may require entry into the process of constructing local theologies at different places. And experience shows that local theologies tend to move by fits and starts, that they are carried out by persons who can work at it only parttime. More and more, local theology is pointing the way to a return to theology as an occasional enterprise, that is, one dictated by circumstances and immediate needs rather than the need for system-building.

The use of a map to chart the relationships in local theologies serves two important purposes: orientation and evaluation. The orientation function helps a community locate where it is in the overall process of developing a complete theology. The evaluation function, which builds upon the orientation function, helps to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses in what has been done: perhaps the theology has not dealt adequately with church tradition, or has inadequately reflected on the cultural context. It thus becomes easier to provide adjustments to the process and to find what it still must seek out to round out its own theological process.

The notion of mapping proposed here owes its origins to developments in field and systems theory, which has extended the concept of "map" into a variety of different areas.[1] In some ways its use here is intended to help a community learn to make its own map as it develops its theology. Each of the

areas has been numbered, to aid in reference (see p. 25). The arrows indicate what would be an ideal flow in the process of constructing a local theology, realizing at the same time that ideal circumstances rarely prevail. Each of the areas will be discussed, with some of the attendant issues and problems raised by interactions in that area.

SPIRIT AND GOSPEL: THE COMMUNITY'S CONTEXT

One cannot speak of a community developing a local theology without its being filled with the Spirit and working under the power of the gospel. Unless the community accepts the free gift of God's grace, unless this experience of grace moves the community both into a praxis consonant with the gospel and into deeper communion with the other churches, we are not talking about an adequate locale for the expression and development of theology. It cannot be forgotten that theology is the work of God through a human, graced community.
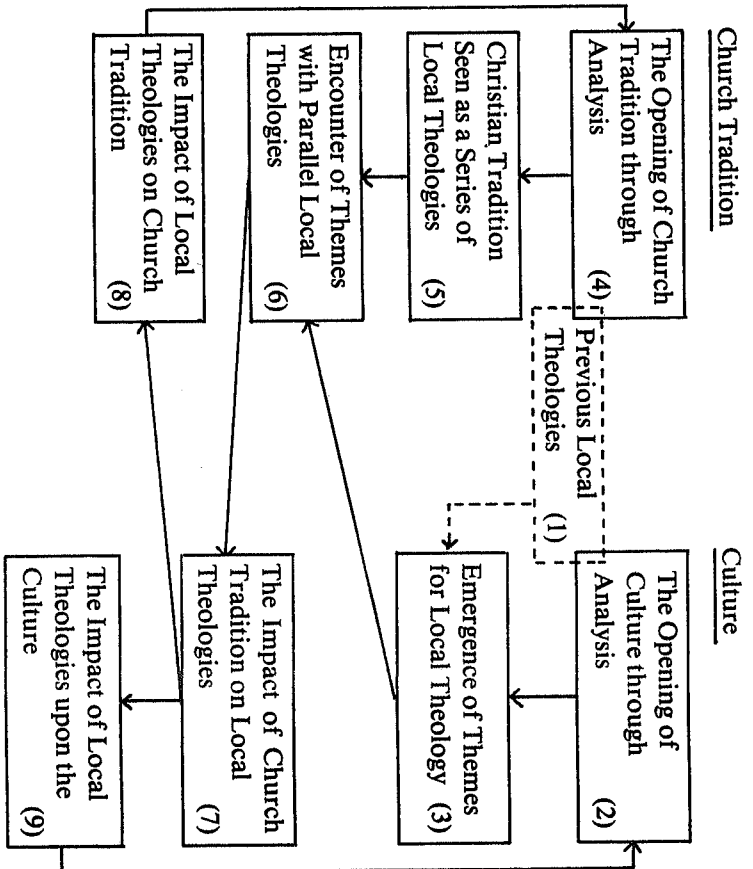
Many of the small Christian communities have experienced again and again the power of the word of God as they gather to reflect upon the Scriptures. However, many of those, especially those part of the Catholic communion, have come to feel keenly the imbalance of receiving the freedom of the word of God but being denied eucharistic participation. The revised Code of Canon Law promulgated for Roman Catholics in 1983 speaks of the right of Christians to the sacraments. How will this right be met under the current disciplines governing clergy and the celebration of the Eucharist? In Roman Catholic ecclesial tradition, Eucharist has been central to nurturance of the Christian life. How to deal with an incompleteness, now to be defined as a deprivation of rights, is a vexing problem.[2]

Another way of speaking about this context created by the movement of the Spirit and by the power of the gospel in a community is that it creates a certain spirituality among the believers. A way to God is charted out, a pathway to deeper faith and commitment opens out before the community. This pathway provides the essential context within which the local theology is then developed. Theology has to be more than an acute analysis of culture and tradition. It is always done for the sake of a community.

That spirituality, lived out over a period of time, provides in itself a kind of history or heritage, which helps to orient the community. The remembering of God's favor and judgment helps the community, like the ancient Israelites, to make its decisions in the current situation.

That spirituality, lived out over a period of time, quite manifestly informs many local churches today. A theology so strongly suffused with this kind of spirituality not surprisingly begins to take on the contours of a wisdom theology, reminiscent of patristic times. This kind of theology will be explored in more detail in chapter 4. Suffice it to say here that perhaps the majority of theologies emerging in these new contexts favors the wisdom style

Spirit and Gospel: Shaping the Community Context

Church Tradition   Culture

- The Opening of Church Tradition through Analysis (4)
- Previous Local Theologies (1)
- The Opening of Culture through Analysis (2)
- Christian Tradition Seen as a Series of Local Theologies (5)
- Emergence of Themes for Local Theology (3)
- Encounter of Themes with Parallel Local Theologies (6)
- The Impact of Church Tradition on Local Theologies (7)
- The Impact of Local Theologies on Church Tradition (8)
- The Impact of Local Theologies upon the Culture (9)

of theology (*sapientia*) over the sure-knowledge style (*scientia*) preferred in academic settings. In many ways these communities are taking important steps toward once again giving this form a special place of honor among churches of Western provenance. As will also be indicated in chapter 4, this phenomenon does not only hold for those contextual theologies of the ethnographic type. It can be fairly stated that liberation theologies are wisdom theologies turned outward to social conditions.

From the questions of the overall context in which local theology is developed, we turn to individual factors in the process of the interrelation of gospel, church, and culture.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF THE BEGINNING POINT

How does a local theology begin? Ordinary life rarely admits of those times when a clear and simple beginning can be made. One of three possibilities often occurs. In the first possibility, a community wishing to engage in the development of its theology will find itself confronted with other theologies already in place, of greater or less value to the community. For example, a

religious leader in Nigeria interested in a more truly contextual liturgy finds a long-standing tradition and predilection for chant and Latin hymnody among the people.

At other times a different situation is present: an event overtakes a community and must be responded to immediately, leaving no time to investigate what might be the best point of departure for a local theology. For example, a number of years ago, a long lockout took place at a mine in Bolivia. Finally the wives of the miners gathered at the local cathedral on the Feast of the Holy Innocents and began a fast. Over the next few days, they were joined by the bishop, by more women, and finally also by men. An event overtakes a community. It needs a response.

In still other instances, a third possibility presents itself. The results of larger theological efforts, such as the documents arising out of the CELAM (Latin American Episcopal Conference) meeting in Puebla in 1979, present materials that must be responded to in local circumstances in Latin America. Thus beginning points can arise from previous theologies, from the culture, or from church tradition. All three of these need to be examined as potential beginning points.

PREVIOUS LOCAL THEOLOGIES (AREA I, SEE P. 25)

Rare would be the occasion for a community where its theological development could begin *de novo*. As any Christian community grows, it receives understandings of God and the action of God in history from others. The ability to begin the theological process within a community marks its coming to a certain maturity and assumes that it has been fed by other local theologies up to that time.

The problem arises when those received theologies are no longer adequate or even become an obstacle to a local church's development. This occurs especially when a community has wrapped up its identity in one particular theological expression. Examples of this are myriad. The experience of renewal after Vatican Council II presented one such occasion when many a local church found itself between a theology that had given it identity for years and the challenge coming from the council to move into new possibilities.

In many of the younger churches, which had sacrificed much to take on the local theology of its missionaries, the challenge to develop a local theology of its own has proved paradoxical, puzzling, and painful. Among many Asian Christians, their having become Christian caused painful separations from their families. Early in the twentieth century it was said in China that every time the church gained a convert, China lost a citizen. When people who have made a courageous decision to leave all things are then told that it is no longer necessary to give up veneration of ancestors and other customs, they often respond with utter incredulity.

In other situations the local theologies of the outsiders adopted in local

communities became a special mark of distinction and identification. In parts of rural Africa the strange music and vesture of European Christianity bestowed a special status on those who came to Christianity, since the colonial message was one of Western things being superior to anything African. Thus even the Independent Churches would continue to employ Western vestments, music, and ritual to some degree. In the United States, as black people moved up the economic ladder, they often changed church affiliation accordingly, choosing liturgical traditions further and further away from the enthusiastic and thaumaturgical ways of the urban storefront or Holiness church. To be asked to rid African liturgy of its Western accoutrements, or to introduce gospel music into a middle-class, United States, black Episcopal or Roman Catholic church service has often met with resistance. The resistance often stemmed from a suspicion on the part of the people that this was another trick of the powerful whites to take away their access to a better economic world by keeping them clearly black (i.e., inferior). Calling it contextualization or inculturation was perceived as simply a way of concealing the actual motives of the white leadership.

An experience similar to these could be found in the early stages of the development of liberation theology in Latin America. Eager, committed Christians interested in conscientizing the poor often found themselves confronted with the massive, unmoving reality of the *religiosidad popular* of the villages and barrios. The first inclination of those committed Christians was to reject this reality. But to do so would have been to reject the actual context of their work. And so for many years thinkers had to ponder the relation between the religion expressed in the theology of liberation and the religion of processions, blessings, and favors.

How does one respond to these realities of previous local theologies? Ordinarily they are perceived as obstacles to the development of genuine local theologies. And obstacles they indeed are. But to try to remove them as one tries to remove an obstacle from a roadway may not be the best approach to dealing with the problem.

Previous local theologies can indeed be obstacles, but they are also powerful reminders. They remind us of what a local church has struggled with in the past. They remind current local leaders how their predecessors (or sometimes they themselves) may have created these obstacles as part of the conversion process. To admit persons in polygamous marriages in rural East Africa to Christian baptism will not sit well with those Christians who not long ago had to turn out their wives (or as women, were turned out) in order to embrace the fullness of Christian faith. We must be reminded of who created the obstacles in the first place. And we should not be surprised if those people see in this a new paternalistic ploy. Patience, a lot of listening, and careful dialogue will be necessary in order to lay the groundwork for possible removal of those previous local theologies.

Previous local theologies can not only be obstacles and reminders; they can also have revelatory aspects. Those parts of previous local theologies which

are woven into the very warp and woof of local Christian identity need closer investigation. What really led to the formation of the *religiosidad popular*? What do these realities say about the patterns of need in the culture where the local church finds itself? In other instances, Christianity has often had its greatest initial success among the marginated people in a culture: Japanese intellectuals, Indian no-castes, slaves and wealthy women in the Roman empire. Often Christianity gives them a sense of worth and status denied them by the culture. What would "fully inculturate" mean to such people? What will the alternate source of their identity derive from? When asked to make this change by a leader who does not share their plight, the discrepancy is revealed in all its poignancy.

Previous local theologies may become obstacle, reminder, revelation. Strategies for dealing with those previous local theologies will have to keep in mind which factor is uppermost. What does that fiercely contested communion railing mean for the feuding parties in a church: a boundary that helps to establish identity or an obstacle to full participation? Perspectives become important: For whom is it important that previous local theologies change? Does the intransigence of the elders mean the driving out of the young? Or is it simply a matter of pride for the expatriate pastor?

THE OPENING OF CULTURE (AREA 2, SEE P. 25)

Ideally, for a genuinely contextual theology, the theological process should begin with the opening of culture, that long and careful listening to a culture to discover its principal values, needs, interests, directions, and symbols. Only in this way can the configurations of a culture become apparent of themselves, without simply responding to other kinds of needs extrinsic to the culture.

Important to preparing for this discipline of listening is to have a theory of culture with an attendant methodology for uncovering the realities of a culture. How to listen to culture is the subject of chapter 3, but a few things should be mentioned here.

There is certainly more than one way to go about analyzing a culture, as we shall see, and, depending upon what issues are before a community, different approaches can contribute to an analysis of a situation. Thus, if there are overriding economic issues, materialist approaches may be the most helpful. If there are issues of interaction in social roles, functionalist approaches may be the most useful. Semiotic approaches (to which much of chapter 3 is devoted) are thought to be the most helpful in terms of the symbolic development of a community.

Listening to the culture calls for what American anthropologist Clifford Geertz has termed the "thick description" of culture.[3] Only through trying to catch the sense of a culture holistically and with all its complexity will we be in the position to develop a truly responsive local theology. An inherent danger for local theology in giving such attention to the ques-

tion of culture is a certain cultural romanticism. Reminiscent of Enlightenment concepts of the natural person, this cultural romanticism will tend to see only good in a culture and to believe that the ideal state of the culture would be reached if it were left untouched by the outside world. To be sure, the more intimately acquainted anyone becomes with a culture and the more one sees its delicate balancing of forces, the more one can become entranced by its beauty. But to fall prey to this kind of romanticism assumes that there is no sin in the world, that people cannot be and are not often cruel to one another, and that culture contact is always a bad thing. One should remember that, if Christianity is alive at all in a situation, it will certainly change things about the culture. The Christian message, after all, is about change: repentance, salvation, and an eschatological reality to be realized. To think that Christianity will not change a situation is to rob the Christian message of its most important part.

Cultural romanticism on the part of Christian communities is often prompted by the lack of proper cultural sensitivity in the past. But to correct a lack of cultural sensitivity by creating an atmosphere inimical to any critique simply produces a new set of problems.

Beneath this approach suggested for understanding culture—listening, developing a thick description, finding the balance between respect of the culture and the need for change within culture—lies a theological position that is characteristic of many contextual theologies. When described from a christological point of view, it can be stated thus: the development of local theologies depends as much on finding Christ already active in the culture as it does on bringing Christ to the culture. The great respect for culture has a christological basis. It grows out of a belief that the risen Christ's salvific activity in bringing about the kingdom of God is already going on before our arrival. From a missionary perspective there would be no conversion if the grace of God had not preceded the missionary and opened the hearts of those who heard. It grows too out of those cautious reflections found in Vatican Council II's Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, wherein the saving activity of God is discerned as active outside the visible Christian church.[4] What this stance means is that a local community must listen to its culture in order to complement its past experience of Christ. It must be able to recognize the signs of Christ's presence in its midst. How those signs are to be recognized the council only hints at indirectly. One of the ways suggested elsewhere in this book is through an understanding of Christ out of the wisdom tradition of the Bible. To see Christ as the Wisdom of God—certainly no new representation of the Lord—is a way of reading the divine presence in a culture that is already working out the saving activity.[5]

CULTURE TEXTS: THE EMERGENCE OF THEMES (AREA 3, SEE P. 25)

From the analysis of the culture comes the emergence of what we shall call culture texts, in which are contained themes that in turn are the cultural nu-

cleus around which a local theology develops. Depending upon the mode of cultural analysis used and to the extent that emphasis is placed either on identity or on social change, the way these themes emerge will differ.

Which themes emerge seems to be determined by two principal factors: (1) a current and often urgent need in a culture; (2) the larger patterns that determine how things are done in a culture. Examples of the first kind can be found in many liberation theologies. Current needs often point to need for social change. Land and water rights, unemployment, life crises of death or separation—these all have a profound impact on a community. They need to be taken up into the larger pattern of meaning that the gospel can provide, not only to provide guidance for action, but also to integrate these jarring data into a larger framework of meaning. The symbolization of these activities becomes important. For example, the Sri Lankan theologian Tissa Balasuriya showed some years ago how the themes of self-giving and self-emptying of Christ in the Eucharist became symbols that helped to give shape to the social struggles of his people.⁶ In a struggle over land ownership in the southern Philippines, a local community decided at one point henceforth to use only a single loaf at the Eucharist, rather than the traditional individual hosts. The single loaf represented their union with Christ and unity in struggle against the injustices of the absentee landowners. Or to use another, well-known example: the cross of Christ has long served Christians undergoing trial as a sign that could give shape to their own suffering.

Sometimes the symbols that draw together the concerns of a people do not represent so much a single need or crisis as a larger way of doing things. Roman Catholic theology has often looked at the world through the prism of a theology of creation. A bit of reflection shows why this would be the case. In a religious tradition concerned about inclusivity and the salvation of whole sectors of the population, one needs to reach as wide as creation itself. In cross-cultural theologies spanning quite diverse experiences, creation theologies are often the best way to proceed with developing a local theology. Wisdom theologies in Judaism were evidence of this already before the time of Christ. On the other hand, theologies more concerned with emphasizing the word of prophecy in the message of the New Testament have often turned to a more christocentric approach in theology, emphasizing salvation more than creation. Western neo-orthodox theology and many theologies of liberation have taken this tack. Again, where salvation is the central need and theme, it is not surprising that the Savior should take central place. In many places in the world where community and family form the basis of identity and relation to God, ecclesiology becomes the prism through which theology is seen. This makes sense in those areas where extended family is important and permeates every aspect of existence. Japan is a good example. There, where even the place of employment can be seen as an extension of the family, to begin one's theology around themes of the redeemed community seems natural. In all those areas of the world where the family is being disrupted by migration,

it is also a likely candidate. In many parts of the world, ecclesiology or Christian community as a starting point for theological reflection is already taking its place along more traditional starting points of creation and redemption. Western theologians are less used to such a starting point; but such a starting point is becoming more common and is leading to a different organization of the great themes of Christian faith.

Not only the major themes but the forms of theology can be profoundly affected by cultural patterns. Not only is it a matter of how meaning is organized in a culture, but also how it is to be communicated. In much of the history of Christian theology, East and West, the written treatise or the commentary on another written text has been the most common medium for the communication of theology. But all this assumes the primacy of literacy, of access to written texts, and to a cultural assumption that such are important. Since theology was for a long time the preserve of the educated clergy, this was considered legitimate. But radio and television have made even those cultures with majority literacy less dependent upon written texts as the medium for communicating cultural meaning. And in other cultures in the world, while literacy may be widespread, it is of such recent origin that it still has no strong influence. Literacy may mix with other forms; one thinks of the tremendous distribution of comic books in East and South Asia, which mix pictures and text.

We certainly are not arguing against literacy, but the point we are making here is an important one: we cannot presume written texts—with all they in turn assume about argumentation—as the sole form for communicating cultural meaning, and therefore theology. Perhaps more African theology will be done via proverbs, which are important in communication in sub-Saharan cultures.⁷ James Cone has already argued for the use of the spirituals and the blues as the medium for black theology in the United States.⁸ The use of poetry in Japan, the *singsing* in Melanesia, movies and music among the young in the United States—these all suggest that local theologies will often reach to local media for the communication of religious meaning. This important question will be taken up again in chapter 4.

THE OPENING OF CHURCH TRADITION (AREA 4,)

Parallel to the opening of culture is an opening of the church tradition. If church tradition is the beginning point of the development of a local theology, then one is most likely dealing with a translation model of local theology rather than a contextual one. As was indicated above, there are times when translation models are necessary because of reasons of pastoral urgency or because of events in the larger church. A traditional ritual gives the wrong message, and so an adaptation needs to take place. Or a movement in the larger church calls local communities to renewal and development, and this needs to be taken into the life of the local community. To the extent that

such translations resonate with realities in the local church they can become effectively contextualized. And the ability of messages to come from other Christian communities is important to the catholicity of the church, to the communion among the churches (a matter to be taken up in chapter 5).

Even in those situations in which translation of theology is called for, how the church tradition is opened up to a local community is important. Too often this has been done in a positivist way through a surface reading of church texts. Often, too, it is done through the monocultural lenses of the expatriate leadership in a community, without reflection on how much they might have been westernizing a people as they Christianized them. For a young church, the weight of two millennia of Christian tradition is formidable, even monolithic. For churches used to relating to other churches in colonialist patterns of domination and submission, any utterance of the dominating churches comes as immutable law. For those Roman Catholics whose experience extends only to the uniformities of the Tridentine reforms and two centuries of strong centralized church authority, church tradition may seem to have been all cut from the same cloth.

Alongside the need for a theory of culture, it becomes obvious that there must be a theory of the role of tradition in communities. As long as one has but a single tradition with no outside interference, one can live with a tradition in a positivistic fashion. But once there are multiple traditions or conflicting interpretations of the same tradition, one must formulate a theory about the role of tradition in the community. The Enlightenment in Western Europe raised this question for Western Christianity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it is now a question for Orthodox Christianity as well. Factors involved in shaping a theory of tradition will be explored in chapter 5.

TRADITION AS A SERIES OF LOCAL THEOLOGIES (AREA 5, SEE P. 25)

It is not surprising that contextual local theologies would see tradition as a series of local theologies, that is, theologies growing up in response to needs in certain contexts. A little reflection makes this obvious. Any catechist who has tried to explain to a religion class the complexities of Chalcedonian christology will realize that some of the Chalcedonian questions are no longer questions to many contemporary local churches, even though these may be normative for them. Yet those theologies that have survived down to the present time have survived for a reason: they expressed with some degree of adequacy the experience of believers. That gives them some measure of enduring validity for local communities today, as touchstones and sometimes as measuring rods for their own experience.

This contextual theological reflection commits itself to seeing the theological tradition passed on through the centuries as a series of local theologies. Such a procedural commitment, however, still leaves two important questions unanswered: (1) How shall we come to see the tradition as a series of

local theologies? (2) What is the relative normative value of each of the theologies that emerges?

Chapter 4 takes up the first question, and suggests applying the sociology of knowledge to the history of Christian theology as a way to see the relation of context to the form and content of the theology which developed. The second question is of prime importance for every Christian church. All the churches have always accorded more normative value to the theologies of certain churches than to others. All Christians would give high normativeness to the churches of the New Testament. The major ecumenical councils of the first five centuries also hold a special place for most churches. The great confessions from the sixteenth century are important for Reformation Christianity, and magisterial and additional conciliar statements have played the same role in Roman Catholic Christianity. How does this way of reading the tradition mesh with seeing the tradition as a series of local theologies, particularly as historical research uncovers more of the contexts in which each of these first appeared? This question, so important both to the authenticity of the witness in the local church and to the catholicity of the larger church, will be addressed in chapter 5.

THE ENCOUNTER OF CHURCH TRADITION AND LOCAL THEMES (AREA 6, SEE P. 25)

In the encounter of church tradition and local themes, the actual development of a local theology takes place. Local theologies in the church tradition are sought out that parallel the local theme or need, either in content, in context, in form, or in all three.

When liberation theology sought to clarify its christology in Latin America, it found kinship in some of the New Testament synoptic christologies, more so than in the Johannine and Pauline christologies, which have been the prime determinant of the larger tradition. Much of the post-Vatican II re-

form found patristic parallels in matters of liturgy, sacramental praxis, and church order as a way of developing new local theologies. As a result, much contemporary Western eucharistic theology sounds more like the eucharistic theology prior to the great theological debates on the Real Presence of the tenth century than it sounds like subsequent theology.

The seeking out of parallels in the tradition, the similar experience of other communities in similar contexts at other times helps to shape the newer local theologies in a number of important ways. First, it reduces to a significant degree the problems of paternalism. A local church has a better chance of approaching the tradition on an equal footing, inasmuch as a local church, according to Vatican Council II, can represent in itself the fullness of the church.[9] Second, this kind of parallelism allows for a more genuine encounter of the tradition with the local church, both to aid in the consolidation of their understanding of the reality of Christ, and to strengthen the challenge to fidelity in discipleship. And finally, the parallelism provides the possibility of

a local church helping to expand the history of Christian reflection that makes up the tradition. The two latter points are the subjects of areas 7 and 8 on the chart.

THE IMPACT OF THE TRADITION ON LOCAL THEOLOGY (AREA 7, SEE P. 25)

For a local theology to become a Christian local theology, it must have a genuine encounter with the Christian tradition. Any theological formulation can be subject to human failing, to a less than complete fidelity to the message of Jesus. For this reason it needs to be tested against the experience of other Christian communities, both present and past.

The encounter can result in an affirmation of what is happening in the local church. It may be another manifestation, in slightly different form, of a recurring experience of the reality of Christ in a local community.

At the same time, the circumstances and experience of two communities are never exactly alike. These differences can serve as a spur and a challenge to the local church to think beyond the similarities to the differences. Some-times a local church will find its closest parallel in Christian history with ambivalent or even heterodox movements. The response to poverty in the sprawling urban centers of many countries today can lead one close to the responses characteristic of Western medieval movements concerning pov-erty, both heterodox and orthodox. Elaine Pagels has pointed out that con-temporary feminist experience can find parallels among some early heterodox Gnostic communities.[10] The results of these encounters may lead to a chastening of the response of the local community, or perhaps to a rethink-ing of the nature of the heterodoxy of those earlier communities.

The tradition has more than this monitoring effect upon the development of a local theology, however. It can make genuine contributions by urging the local community into reflecting on issues that had not occurred to the people or by pointing to implications that had not yet clearly arisen. The ministry of Jesus ended at the cross, a clear sign of failure in the human sphere. What will that say about the spirituality undergirding our present struggle against injus-tice? Religious communities, both Christian and non-Christian, have had to deal with the dilemma of purity of doctrine in a community of the elect versus more inclusive community that offers at least some measure of salvation to all. As a local community finds itself opting more for one or for the other of these possibilities, how shall it complement its activity?

THE IMPACT OF LOCAL THEOLOGY ON THE TRADITION (AREA 8, SEE P. 25)

Just as the tradition is necessary for the development of a local theology, so too local theologies are vital for the development of the tradition. By raising the questions they do, local theologies can remind us of parts of the tradition we have forgotten or have chosen to ignore. The struggles of contemporary poor Christians have helped to remind us all that the issues of rich and poor

are the most commonly raised moral problems in the Gospels. The theme of justice has been resurrected by the experience of these communities into the awareness of many other communities. The reflection of feminist communi-ties is making the larger church aware of how parts of the tradition were forgotten, skewed, and even suppressed, and need to be reconstructed or rehabilitated.

The experience of local communities can also remind us of the fallibility of parts of the tradition. Black communities in the United States and in South Africa remind us of long-prevailing church attitudes toward slavery, even from the most official instances. Reformation communities in the sixteenth century reminded the larger medieval church how far it had strayed from what could be called Christian practice.

Local communities can also aid the tradition in its development by their reflections. They can contribute to the resolution of dilemmas that other local churches may be feeling. African senses of divinity and grace may con-tribute to Western struggle with theism. The sense of extended family in the Philippines and the Orient may aid the United States and northern Europe in their problems with the nuclear family. Some of these contributions are only now beginning to take shape, but they bode well for the development of the tradition of the larger church.

THE IMPACT OF LOCAL THEOLOGY ON THE CULTURAL SITUATION (AREA 9, SEE P. 25)

Local theology, while most likely intended in the first instance for the com-munity in which it develops, ultimately will have some impact on the cultural situation in which it was born. Unless there is a strong bifurcation between church and culture that makes the gap unbridgeable, the theology is bound to have an effect on the culture and on the questions that the culture will raise in the future.

As an example, the civil religion that binds Americans together despite the plurality of voluntary church associations could not have taken the form it has without the reflections of the New England divines in the prerevolu-tionary period. Their experience of deliverance in coming to the American colonies they interpreted as parallel to the deliverance of Moses out of Egypt. By extension, then, the American colonies became the Promised Land. How this fed the wounded self-esteem of persecuted immigrant populations as they, too, became Americans needs no documentation. How it also fed na-tional policies of Manifest Destiny, Big Brother, and America's own colonial practices, unfortunately, needs no further documentation either. A powerful local theology had an impact of tremendous proportion on the culture.

In another way the covenant theology put forth by the Nederduitse Gere-formeerde Kerk in South Africa also had a powerful impact on the peoples of that land, giving theological justification to apartheid.

The reason for making the point about how a local theology feeds back

into the cultural setting is to show how the issues in area 9 help to continue the dialectical cycle of the developing of local theologies. If looked at in a linear fashion, this marks the beginning of the cycle again as the process of discerning the response to the present of Spirit and gospel in the community again takes on urgency.

OTHER ISSUES IN READING THE CHART

In any map or chart certain templates imposed upon it will give the familiar contours different relationships. Certain issues give different shapes to the relationships just discussed. Some issues of this kind in local theology need at least mention here, although they will come up again in subsequent chapters.

THE AUDIENCE OF LOCAL THEOLOGY

For whom is local theology intended? Who makes up its audience? A simple question, perhaps, but one which, unheeded, can create great difficulties. The question of audience affects the choice of themes, the procedures for development, and the criteria for judging its adequacy.

American theologian David Tracy has made a valuable contribution in distinguishing three "publics" for theology: academy, church, and society." Theology, as it is intended for each of these groups, will take on different contours and will need to be subjected to different criteria of adequacy. Often debates about what is theology are confused by not carefully distinguishing the public for whom the theology is intended. In the local theologies under discussion here, failure to make these distinctions can also affect how the theology itself is developed.

One could say that perhaps most of the theology that gets written down and published is directed to the academy, either to professional theologians or to scholars in allied fields. This is not surprising, inasmuch as those who are professional, full-time theologians are generally the ones who have the time or can take the time to write a book. This is a legitimate and important form of theology. One cannot imagine, for example, Vatican Council II as having taken place without the historical research or the theological reflection of the academy. In facing issues of secularization, religion and science, and Christianity and global social problems, the work of the professional theologian is essential. For local theologies, the work done by professional theologians in helping better to understand local theologies of the past or in interpreting what is happening in the present is of inestimable value.

Much of what might be considered local theology today, however, probably would not be addressed to the academy. The criteria for intelligibility and cohesiveness are not always the same as they would be for the academy. The alliance between theologian and community is different, since a primary focus of the academic theologian is the community of professional theologians. This is not to disdain the contribution of theologians, but again merely to try to situate their contribution for the sake of avoiding confusion.

Local theologies are more often addressed to the local church and the larger church. Those emphasizing the consolidation of the identity of a Christian community would fall into this category particularly. One of the criteria for intelligibility here is certainly the correspondence between what is said and what is experienced. The clarity sought is especially one that will illumine the experience of the community.

Often local theologies will be intended for society as well, particularly when it is a matter of dealing with issues of social ill and the need for change. Part of that address to the world is an attempt of a community to explain its own stance to itself; it can also be an appeal to all people of goodwill to join in the pursuit of justice.

These categories of academy, church, and society are not mutually exclusive. The theology of the academy is most often also intended to aid the church in some way. What happens in a local community can become important for the deliberations in the academy. Both academy and church can and do address society's problems and issues. But there is a primary focus, and that focus will shape what counts for clarity, intelligibility, and good argument. When constructing a local theology, an awareness of who is the intended audience is of the utmost importance.

LOCAL THEOLOGY IN A UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Local theology is certainly not anything new to Christianity. But a direct awareness and pursuit of it is relatively recent for most Christian churches. For Roman Catholics, the stress on universality has been such that it makes it difficult to think about how locality and universality are to be related. Vatican Council II in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium) revived ancient thought on the local church without giving all the contours it would now take. But even the reflections there were not intended to diminish the importance of the universality and unity of the church of Christ.

The first question that would arise to anyone concerned about maintaining the oneness of the church and confronted with the bewildering array of human societies and cultures is: How local should theology become? For example, there are seven hundred language families in Papua New Guinea alone. Should each have a local theology? Or should each village in each language family have one? Or should there be more effort put into a theology that will bind the Melanesian church together? "Local church," in Melanesia will mean for Roman Catholics something different from its meaning for Baptists. How are we to make our way through this muddle?

No simple answer can be given to this question. Energies and resources will probably limit theologies being fully constructed on the level of a small community. Even posing the question in this way assumes that two communities, side by side, will have vastly different theologies.

The concern for local theology is not only about the distinctiveness that may arise, but also about the engagement of a larger number of Christians in the enterprise of theological reflection. Such engagement contributes much

to what makes a theology local, even if the results look similar to what is happening elsewhere.

Part of the resolution of this question has to do with the age-old problem of the relation of the particular to the universal. As this affects the discussions here in terms of cultural particulars and universals, it will be touched upon again in the next chapter. In reflecting on this problem, it may be good to remember that figuring out what is universal can be as problematic as figuring out what is local.

FURTHER THINKING IN ECCLESIOLOGY

What is happening in local communities and being expressed in their local theologies will raise questions on how to think about the concept of church itself. This affects not only the relating of the various structural components of small Christian communities to bishops and to the total church. It also affects what we think theologically, what become important symbols, images, and metaphors for expressing the reality of the church. In gatherings of the World Council of Churches, it has been noted that unity will not come about simply through doctrinal agreement, but when an ecclesiology can be found in which the three hundred or so member churches can all find a home. The same issue is present for the development of local theologies.

How these new developments will shape our sense of ecclesiology remains to be seen. But already the point is raised that ecclesiology is going to be one of the major issues in the developing of local theologies—prominent as hermeneutics, modes of cultural analysis, and christology.

Many other issues could be taken up at this point. These, however, are ones looming largely in the minds of many involved in constructing local theologies. These issues, and others, will be addressed again in subsequent chapters.

3

The Study of Culture

LISTENING TO A CULTURE

In ideal circumstances the process of constructing local theologies begins with a study of the culture, rather than with possible translations of the larger church tradition into the local circumstance. This method grows out of two considerations. The first is to avoid the continuance of paternalistic history in which outsiders, barely familiar with a culture, would make decisions about adaptation and what would be "best" for a local culture. While many would accept this assumption today, the actual practice of it, as we shall see, is nonetheless difficult. This paternalistic attitude prevailed (often unconsciously) not only among those who invaded the culture, but often also in the "indigenous leadership" left behind to govern. Hence situations arise where leaders from within the culture have become so alienated from the roots of their own culture, and so socialized into the invading culture, that the situation is often much worse than it was under expatriate leadership. Many local churches are recognizing that a leadership educated in universities outside the country does not always bring a cross-fertilization of new ideas, but sometimes results in a suppression of local ones. The alienating influence can often go further and reach absurd proportions. The image of Third World seminarians being taught from neo-scholastic manuals long abandoned by the Eura-merican cultures for which they were originally intended is one of the most poignant and distressing of these situations.

The second consideration is more theological. To maintain the desired openness and sensitivity to a local situation, it was suggested that the prevailing mode of evangelization and church development should be one of finding Christ in the situation rather than concentrating on bringing Christ into the situation. Without such an attitude, based on the theology of the incarnation, one consistently runs the risk of introducing and maintaining Christianity as an alien body in a culture. The word of God never receives the opportunity to take root and bear fruit. What results in many instances are dual systems of belief, wherein the older system continues alongside Christianity, with each

6

Popular Religion
and Official Religion

he late twentieth century has witnessed a resurgence of theological in-
st in popular religious forms of expression. For a long time popular
gion was by and large denigrated by theologians as a way of expressing
n that needed to be overcome sooner or later by a more sophisticated
erstanding of the gospel. Devotions, processions, pious associations, and
es of pilgrimage seemed to many religious leaders to be realities that
ld pass away with liturgical renewal and a more Word-centered spiritual-
The conscientizing forces of liberation would replace the devotional pat-
s that for so long had marked the Christianity of the great majority of the
ulation.

eality, however, has turned out to be more complex than such prognosti-
ons. A host of forces have contributed to the rethinking of the role of
ular religion as an authentic Christian response to the gospel. Two of
e especially can be singled out.

the first wave of liberation theology in Latin America, a call went out for
ning a new Christian community embodying the liberating power of the
pel and leaving the folk Christianity of the masses behind. Only with such
aven could the whole loaf be leavened.[2] Such a notion of creating an elite
in the mass of Christianity was certainly not new; similar sentiments had
n echoed in church renewal in France in the immediately preceding dec-
s.[3]

ut liberation theology in that first generation wanted to be more than the
guard of genuine Christian conversion in the Latin American context. It
itself as a movement of the people as well. And it soon learned that in
sforming the patterns of Christianity it could not ignore the longer-lived
gion of the people. This has led to concentrated study on the whole phe-
nenon of how religion is lived and experienced by the great majority of the
ple of Latin America. Known most commonly as "popular religiosity,"

(*religiosidad popular*), the work of Latin American theologians and of so-
ciologists has been immensely helpful to the world church in coming to a
deeper understanding of what is probably one of the most prevalent forms of
Christian experience.

A divergence between official ecclesiastical teaching and practice, and pat-
terns of Christian behavior in the larger populace is not specific to Latin
America. It has marked Christian life—and indeed life in other great reli-
gious traditions—everywhere. Popular religion has become increasingly the
subject of study in Europe as well. Some of this has been under Marxist
influence, particularly the influence of the thought of Antonio Gramsci.[4]
Other modes of historiography, influenced by economics, sociology, or the
approach of the *Annales* school in France, have also undertaken investiga-
tion of the religious activity and experience of the majority of the European
population.[5] Concomitant to this has been the study of popular religion in
other great religious traditions.[6]

Interest in popular religion is of special importance for developing local
theologies. A close reading of the shape of popular religion gives us a unique
perspective on the nature of religious activity and experience in concrete so-
cial contexts. It tells us something also of the role of religion in social change
and in the continuing process of shaping identity in a particular cultural set-
ting. To undertake the development of local theologies while rejecting or
ignoring the religious patterns already present in a community suggests the
very kinds of paternalism against which local theology has struggled. Hence
to be able to develop an adequate local theology one must listen to the reli-
gious responses already present in the culture. Practices and symbolic
networks have already taken shape. What do these say of life in that commu-
nity?

A second reason for interest in popular religion in developing local theolo-
gies is more practical in nature. The previous local theologies that new theolo-
gies encounter usually have within them a good admixture of popular
religion. Often this popular religion needs to be addressed along with the
previous local theology, inasmuch as it may share the imported character of
the theology. For example, Iberian popular religion has heavily influenced
the popular religious patterns of Taiwan, the Philippines, and Latin
America.

This chapter will review some of the major issues surrounding the use of
popular religion in the development of local theologies, as well as look to-
ward what the communities can teach us about future directions in the ex-
pression of Christian experience. It will begin by examining the definitions
given to popular religion and what these say about perspectives and under-
lying assumptions about religion. From there it will move into the major
interpretive frameworks that have been developed for understanding popular
religion. This will lead to looking at a number of specific questions arising
from such investigations and that are of significance to developing theologies
in their concrete contexts.

WHAT IS POPULAR RELIGION?

A wide variety of terms are used for what is being called here, "popular religion." Some of these reflect the different languages in which the discussion is being carried on; in other instances they imply quite different assumptions about the phenomenon being investigated. Because of these differences it is important to know where any given usage might be placed within the spectrum of opinion. At the same time this also reveals the variety of perspectives that are being taken on this phenomenon.

The term "popular religion" derives from the use of the adjective "popular" as it is found in its variants in the Romance languages. Literally it means "of the people" and can be used to mean of all people in general, or of one class of people (usually the poor, majority class) in particular.[7] It is not ordinarily used in the English sense of "popular" meaning "in fashion." When used in Latin American contexts, it generally refers to the poor, majority class. When used in North American contexts (as in "popular culture"), it refers to the majority, middle class.

A second term that is sometimes used is "folk religion." This derives from the Germanic adjective meaning "of the people." While it can be understood to carry the same meaning as "popular," it generally has additional overtones. Through the work initiated in Germany in the early nineteenth century by Herder and others, "folk" carries with it connotations of the lower strata of society, people who, in their simplicity, are the subjects of the authentic history of a nation. In the romanticized version of "folk," we have a body of wisdom in tales, proverbs, and lore, which has been preserved and transmitted orally from generation to generation. In the politicized version of "folk," we have a native purity and tradition relatively untainted by industrialization and modernization, which periodically asserts itself against the secularization process. It is conservative and often xenophobic in character, glorifying the life of the peasant as the ideal of a people.[8]

A third term is "common religion," suggested by the sociologist Robert Towler.[9] Similar to the two preceding concepts, it emphasizes the fact that the more theological or doctrinal understandings of religion are usually the province of but a small segment of the population, which has been entrusted with the maintenance of religious institutions. The religion of the greater part of the population will have various relationships to the religious institutions of that society, and those people will seldom identify all their religious experience with the social institutions. Towler goes on to suggest that common religion will be made up of the responses to a variety of needs within a population, upon which the religious traditions then build. Common religion forms a baseline of general experience, which is then specified by the institutional expression of religion.[10]

All three of these terms have their specific strengths and weaknesses. "Popular," the most common of the terms, captures a wide range of the

concerns, but lacks a certain specificity. "Folk" has that specificity, but carries strong (and often negative") overtones. "Common" has a sense similar to "popular" and is in some ways the most useful term, but it is also the least well known. In order to connect with the majority of the discussions going on, we shall use the term "popular" in this presentation.

From the use of all three terms—popular, folk, and common—it is clear that the phenomenon under investigation is not seen as independent from other realities. All three of these terms relate this form of religious expression to some other reality. By exploring these relational uses, we can get closer to some of the perspectives and assumptions coming into play.

Popular religion is sometimes contrasted with official religion.[12] If we take official religion to be those prescribed beliefs and norms of an institution promulgated and monitored by a group of religious specialists, then popular religion becomes those patterns of behavior and belief that somehow escape the control of the institutional specialists, existing alongside (and sometimes despite) the efforts at control of these specialists. In this view popular religion is seen as deviation from a norm. The task of official religion, then, is to bring popular religion into line with the established norm. The norm is understood to be a set of beliefs that then define a kind of practice. Popular religion in this sense is construed as having alternate beliefs or no clearly defined beliefs at all.

A second contrast is between popular and elite religion. "Elite" can be understood as either a cultural or a social category. When it is understood as a cultural category, it contrasts the more literate, verbal, and conceptually sophisticated approach of one group with the more illiterate, nonverbal, and often enthusiastic form of another ("lower") group. Most often it is also a social and economic category. The elite group will be identified with power and the control of resources, and the popular group will often be known simply as "the masses" of unlettered and disenfranchised people.[13]

"Elite" can also be used in another way to provide a third contrast, found in the older religious terms "esoteric" and "exoteric." This distinction refers to the quality and quantity of lore transmitted to the population. Certain doctrines and practices will be preserved for an initiated few, while a more general version will be transmitted to the majority. In the discussions of popular religion, this sense of "elite" is used in terms of theological sophistication of some believers over against the more rudimentary level of understanding of the great majority of adherents to a particular religious system.

These three contrasting uses of "popular" bespeak three different axes[14] along which popular religion is interpreted: institutional, social, and intellectual. While certainly not totally discrete categories, they represent distinctive conceptions of the major role of religion in society: as one of institutional organization, of social formation, of intellectual achievement.

What are we to make of all these different kinds of distinctions? It certainly alerts us to the fact that there is no comprehensive theory for grasping the

reality under study. Indeed, it may be fair to assume, as some have,[15] that one can speak of different popular religions in the same cultural setting.

From the perspective of developing local theologies, a number of considerations emerge, which bear keeping in mind. First it is striking that none of these perspectives arises from the side of the phenomenon to be studied. The concern for popular religion seems to arise from the side of official or elite groups. This prompts questions about the audience and interest in studying popular religion: for whom is popular religion an issue? And why is it an issue for them? Is it a matter of analyzing popular religion in order to gain more effective control of it? This could be considered an interest of the officials of the institutional religion. Does an elitist group see it as an inferior product of the culture, which needs to be brought into the mainstream of "progress"? Does the presence of popular religion create a religious dissonance which intellectuals need to harmonize away? One of the reasons, perhaps, why the phenomenon of popular religion has remained intractable to theoretical analysis is that it is being viewed from an outside, and often inimical, perspective. It fails to fall into the categories that the dominant or intellectual class has prepared for it.

A second observation to be made is that religion seems to be construed here as a set of ideas, which then shape a particular practice. This is to a great extent a Western and intellectual bias. For the greater part of the world, religion is more a way of life than a view of life.[16] To try to isolate ideas and then derive the practice of a group from them may be putting the cart before the horse. This particular bias dates in the West especially from the time of the sixteenth-century Reformation with its emphasis upon the word of the Scriptures as normative entirely for Christian living. While it served as a useful corrective for Western Christianity, it does not function usefully as a criterion for understanding religion if employed separately and solely. It assumes a literate, idealist, and rational approach to life.

A third observation comes from the different categories identified above. It suggests that religion is immensely complex and inextricably woven through the fabric of human life. It is not a clear, isolated segment of social life. Any treatment of religion will have to have that kind of holistic approach called for in the analysis of the entirety of culture outlined in Chapter 3. To follow Geertz, religion itself calls for a "thick description." At the same time there is a need to be aware that religion has distinctive economic, political, and social ramifications, as well as the more familiar intellectual or ideational ones. When one analyzes popular religion it is important to know which semiotic domain—economic, political, social, psychological—is predominant in the consideration.

What does all of this mean for developing local theologies? It certainly calls for an adherence to some of the basic principles set out above, namely: trying to listen to the culture on its own terms; adopting a holistic pattern of description; remaining attentive to the audience and the interest of the questioner in each event. The sheer variety in the definitions of popular religion

suggests something of the range of phenomena that come under that name. To that range of phenomena we are now ready to turn.

VARIETIES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF POPULAR RELIGION

Part of outlining the characteristics of popular religion is first to decide what will be included in the category. But without a somewhat comprehensive interpretive framework it is hard to know just what would constitute the boundaries of the category.

In the discussion of popular religion today, a wide range of phenomena is treated under the heading of popular religion. Some examples include: the religious activity of the illiterate majority in medieval and early modern Europe; the imported Iberian popular religion that has taken root in Latin America and the Philippines; the amalgams of African and European popular religion found in the Caribbean and in Brazil; the amalgams of African and European religion found in the African Independent Churches; the amalgams of Buddhist, Shinto, Confucian, and Christian elements in the new religions in Japan; United States civil religion; the dual religious systems among Native Americans in both North and South America, where the two systems are practiced side by side; the dual religious systems in sub-Saharan Africa, where the Christian religious system is returned to in times of crisis.

Other general forms could be added to this list, but this gives something of the range of phenomena that come under the heading of popular religion here. In this chapter we shall concentrate on the first three types mentioned; the amalgams and the dual religious systems will be taken up in chapter 7. Although there is no compelling reason for making this distinction on a theoretical level, there are some empirical ones. In the first three types, historical Western Christianity provides the paradigm in which the religious system is expressed and developed. In the latter cases, it shares the formation of the paradigm with other religious tradition. The case of American civil religion is separate from these considerations, since the debate continues to what extent it can be called a religious system, or to what extent the term "religion" is being used here in an extended sense.[17]

Therefore we shall concentrate on the first three mentioned. The investigations on these concentrate principally, although not exclusively, on the majority, poor population. The concentration is not exclusive because it seems that into the period of the western European high Middle Ages, there was no significant difference in the religious behavior of peasants and the aristocracy and most of the clergy. The economic and social distinctions did not seem to leave their mark on religious activity to any great extent.

A second preliminary consideration suggested by some investigators is a distinction between rural and urban popular religion.[18] When people migrate into cities from the countryside, the rural popular religion often undergoes a transformation. It may diminish in its frequency and cohesion of practice

(secularization), it may take on new forms, or it may be replaced entirely by new religious systems (such as Pentecostalism in Brazil). In other instances it may remain relatively unchanged, since the so-called urbanization of many cities is often really a ruralization of urban centers because of the lack of an industrial base for the transformation of peasants into workers.

We shall address here primarily the rural forms of popular religion and their survivals in urban contexts, with some additional attention to new forms that develop. The majority of the research has been with the rural forms, and most investigators have developed their interpretive frameworks from the rural setting.

What are the principal characteristics of this kind of rural popular religion, shaped in its outward manifestations by historical Christianity? Manuel Marzal and Segundo Galilea[19] have each devoted attention to bringing together the principal characteristics of such religious activity and belief. Their descriptions are based on Latin American popular religion, but can be extended to cover most rural types elsewhere. Their designations can be summed up in the following eight points.

1. *God:* Popular religion begins with an image of God as provident, giving immediate reward and punishment for good and evil deeds in this world. God is at once gracious and stern, and immediately involved in the affairs of the world. Any extraordinary event, either for good or for evil, can be attributed to a decision on the part of God. There is no distinction between levels of causality. Thus if the priest drops the Host when I am about to receive Communion, it is no accident—God is displeased with me. If you find money along the road, God must be answering your prayers. Nothing really happens by chance; all living and nonliving reality is interconnected and controlled immediately by God. All is touched by his hand and is under his eye.

2. *Mediators:* Although God is intimately and concretely involved in the affairs of the world, he is seldom approached directly. Rather a host of mediators is invoked to intercede before God. Principal mediators are Jesus and Mary. While Jesus is seen as divine and not really of human estate, he is not considered quite the same as God. He is invoked especially as the baby Jesus (el niño Dios) and as the Crucified One.

Along with Jesus, Mary enjoys the most powerful mediation. Shrines to Mary usually outnumber those to Jesus. She is seen as the understanding Mother who knows how to approach God on behalf of her children. She appears often to her children, and these places of apparition (Guadalupe, Fatima, Lourdes) become sacred sites where miracles of healing often take place. Special images of her also have healing qualities. Sometimes these images are found (as in the case of Nossa Senhora de Aparecida in Brazil), or appear miraculously (as in the case of the image of the Virgin on the cloak of Juan Diego at Guadalupe), or are of ancient and unknown origin (Altötting in Bavaria, Montserrat in Spain). These images, too, can become the occasion for healings and wonders.

After Mary, there are other mediators, though none so powerful as she. Many have a certain circumscribed domain in which they work. Thus the patron or *santo* of a particular village will protect the people of that village in a special way. Saints Dominic, Francis, Martin, and James are examples of this. Sometimes a *santo* or a special image of the Virgin Mary becomes associated with an entire nation (Guadalupe with Mexico, Czestechowa with Poland). Often it is a specific statue or image, rather than the *santo* it signifies, that will carry this association. Thus if the statue of the *santo* is stolen or destroyed, a village may feel that it has been abandoned by its patron, and a complicated process will have to ensure before patronage is restored.

In addition to the local patron, some saints will become known for being able to protect or mediate certain things. Saint George is venerated, along with Saint Michael, as protection against lightning in parts of the Andes. Saint Agatha protects against fires in northern Europe. Again, a statue or some other form of image is necessary to make a proper intercession.

3. *Social Activities:* There is a strong communal dimension to popular religion. Celebrations are frequent and involve the entire rural community. Principal times for celebration include the feast days of important protectors of the community, anniversaries of miraculous events, significant moments of human passage (baptisms, marriages, funerals), and certain seasonal events (such as harvest celebrations among agricultural peoples). The first two types are celebrated by means of processions around the village with the image of the protector, as well as by feasting, dancing, and perhaps a market. Moments of human passage, especially births and marriages, also call for celebration with feasting and dancing. The fiestas, especially for the patron protectors, are sometimes arranged by special associations, with a rotation of persons in charge. They are often elaborate and constitute a major financial expense for the person in charge. The activities are seen as total events, and can last for several days. They include both prayer and social celebration.

4. *Devotional Activities:* There is also a private dimension to popular religion, built around the seeking of favors from God via the mediators. Individuals develop a personal cult or devotion to a particular image of the Virgin or to specific saints. The regularity of the cult or devotion assures that the Virgin or the saint will be familiar with the supplicant when need arises. Seeking favors is a major part of devotional religion. The favors include protection from evil forces, from illness, from unforeseen crises (sickness, marriage problems), as well as certain boons (a spouse, good crops, successful travel, success in business transactions). Often vows are taken or promises made by persons to engage in certain penitential or prayerful activities if protection is extended or the boon granted. Sometimes vows are in response to protection or favor received.

5. *Additional Mediations:* In addition to the activities just mentioned, there are other dimensions of popular religion that need to be mentioned. Blessings, and religious objects such as relics, medals, rosaries, and portable images play an important role in invoking divine power. Holy water, candles,

blessed palms, ashes, and penitential cords also must be counted among the apparatus of popular religion. Such concrete and tangible objects are necessary for assuring continuing contact with God and his mediators.

Processions, especially processions in pilgrimage, are clear indications of one's devotedness to the protectors and givers of favors who surround the throne of God.

6. *Associations*: Confraternities, sodalities, and other pious associations, dedicated to the Virgin or one of the saints, constitute an important part of popular religion. While they manifest the concrete devotion of their members to the patron, they also serve as the organizations that sponsor the major fiestas of the year. The rotating hosts acquire extensive social prestige and incur substantial expense in providing for the food and drink needed for these occasions. These groupings are essentially lay in character, although clergy may be invited to become members. Those that have official church sanction may also have a clerical moderator. Ordinarily, however, being a member of the clergy does not assure any special rank in these organizations.

7. *View of the World*: One cannot, of course, describe the view of the world underlying popular religion in any exhaustive manner. There are, however, some characteristics that deserve special mention: (a) The world is seen as an interconnected and controlled place. No bad deed goes unpunished, no good deed will be unrewarded, for God sees all. Because of this interconnection and control, there is a limited amount of room for human maneuvering. Some would see this as a certain fatalism about the prospects for human initiative; others, as a way of surviving under hostile circumstances. (b) Concerns are concrete, and requests for divine aid are usually directed at immediate needs. Since the world is a hostile place if one is not protected, a good deal of energy is directed toward assuring continued protection. (c) While concerns are to a large extent concrete, immediate, and this-worldly, there is a balancing concern for death and the afterlife. Death is a major preoccupation because of the high mortality rate in poor areas. It is not welcomed, except for the very old. Afterlife will reflect how one has lived here, and how one has fulfilled familial and moral obligations.

8. *Relation to Official Religion*: Popular religion intersects with official religion at many points. Official religion has clearly influenced the development of popular religion on many fronts. But there are some clear divergences. Among them are the following: (a) Prescriptions for religious activity of the official religion are not observed in popular religion, except where they coincide with popular religious activity. Thus the mandatory Mass attendance on Sundays and holydays for Roman Catholics is by and large ignored. Attendance at Mass is generally not considered important, except where it intersects with concerns of popular religion (patronal feasts, fiestas marking human passage). Sacramentally, baptism, marriage, and funerals are of importance in popular religion, along with First Communion. Communion and confession of sin are infrequent. (b) Clergy play an ambivalent role in popular religion. They are seen as mediators of divine power, but

only in specified areas. While they are needed for blessings, rites of human passage, and processions, their admonitions in other areas are often ignored. They do not exercise an authoritative role in directing the activity of popular religion. (c) Shrines play a more important role in the lives of those involved in popular religion than do church buildings, although the latter are important for the statues they house.

These characteristics have been painted in very broad strokes, which do not do justice to the variety within popular religion. But the characteristics noted are frequent in their occurrence. Together they constitute the framework for the religious experience of what might be the majority of Catholic Christians, and for that reason need to be taken seriously. With this we move to looking at some of the interpretations that attempt to develop a framework for understanding how popular religion functions.

INTERPRETING POPULAR RELIGION

How is one to interpret the phenomena that make up what we call popular religion? Its practices constitute what may be the major forum for religious experience for a majority of Catholic Christians and many Protestant and Orthodox Christians as well. Together these phenomena have provided a coherent communication system with the divine powers for many people over the centuries. They also offer a way for people in isolated areas to gather for extended periods of time in fiestas and other celebrations.

At the same time popular religion has been open to all kinds of abuse: idolatrous veneration of images, unrealistic and bizarre vows and promises made to saints, quarrelsome behavior in the associations. The fatalism in the world-view has kept the oppressed from dealing with the realities of their social conditions. The shadow side of popular religion is more than evident to many, especially to those functioning in official religion, or to those working for the liberation of the oppressed.

Interpretations have to take into account both the bright and shadow sides of popular religion. Some interpretations emphasize one aspect more than the others. The interpretations given here will be grouped by their emphasis on negative and positive aspects of popular religion.

NEGATIVE APPROACHES

For a long time, negative approaches dominated the interpretation of popular religion. They were essentially of two types: elitist and Marxist.

1. *Elitist Approaches*: Elitist approaches to interpreting popular religion were formulated principally by religious intellectuals interested in the reform of the church. They saw themselves as a small, informed group whose task was to enlighten the darkness of a popular religion that was situated somewhere between indifference and superstition. The urban working classes of Europe in France and Belgium had lapsed into indifference while their rural

cousins were locked in superstition.[20] Popular practice had strayed far from the meaning and commitment of gospel discipleship. The Christian commitment of most believers was to a kind of folk church that was of importance for birth, marrying, and burying, but carried little other sense of Christian value or virtue. These intellectuals saw evangelization and education leading to social action as the key to the dissolution of the folk church and the emergence of a genuinely conscious and committed Christian community. Among Catholics this action was seen as carrying out the best sentiments of church renewal; among Protestants, as returning to the ideals of the Reformation.

The strength of this approach is its close attunement to the gospel and its keen sense of Christian mission. It holds up an ideal of Christian commitment and service that invites a deeper realization of the mystery of Christ. Its sense of action presses toward the realization of a genuinely just society.

At the same time it shows some important weaknesses. It understands religion primarily in terms of ideas and a view of life, evidenced in its belief that verbal evangelization and more education will lead to a religious transformation. It is elitist in its self-assurance of its own command of the truth and its own plans for the reorganization of society. It intends to keep clear control of the process of change. It is interesting to note what happens when this elite is bypassed by other forms of renewal. The earlier renewal pioneered in France was in some ways superseded by Vatican Council II, and, as Bernard Lauret has documented, it left these intellectuals in a rearguard, integralist stance.[21]

The elitist approach to popular religion rarely is able to change popular religion much because it understands popular religion so abstractly and intellectually. A more concrete and comprehensive approach is needed if the elitist ideals are to be realized.

2. Marxist Approaches: Another negative approach comes out of a Marxist analysis. Such an approach would see popular religion as the false consciousness imposed by the ruling class upon the proletariat. This false consciousness is imposed in one of two ways. Either the ruling class directs the proletariat away from the real sources of social power to some putative otherworldly power, or it encourages the proletariat to engage in popular religious activities to achieve this-worldly success, which will never actually yield up the promised results. In both instances the actual relations of power and labor are obscured by a set of religious relations, which mask the genuine realities. From the Marxist perspective the majority are not poor or needy through the lack of resources, but because the ruling class has robbed the majority of the surplus value of their labor. To compensate for this loss the majority are allowed to believe in (or are encouraged to believe in) some reward in the afterlife for current deprivation and to seek out stopgap help in the meantime from their mediators. Church leaders are to be counted on to help maintain the illusion of power in popular religion.

The Marxist position calls for a transformation by destruction of the lies about access to power and for a politicization of the consciousness of the proletarian majority in order that they might see the genuine relations of

power and labor that mark society. Only then can popular religion be changed: either to disappear altogether or to be transformed into genuine religion—depending on whether or not the analyst has a religious perspective. To quote an analyst (Francisco Vanderhoff) looking toward the transformation of religion: "one cannot 'evangelize' popular religion without demythologizing it, and one cannot demythologize it without politicizing its own environmentally conditioned sociopolitical relationships."[22] Of the two possible results of transformation of popular religion, atheistic Marxists have worked toward the former, and some members of the first generation of liberation theologians have worked toward the latter.

What are the strengths of Marxist approaches? Most notably they emphasize to what extent religious forms of expression are tied up with the totality of other social relationships. One cannot easily extricate religious activity from the rest of the human fabric and treat it independently. Second, Marxist analysts are correct in saying that some sectors of society have a special interest in seeing the proletarian majority of a society believe in a certain fashion, and want to keep things that way. Having their eyes turned toward heaven keeps them from analyzing the squalor of their current condition. Third, there is good reason to believe that religious change cannot come about with concomitant changes in the economic sphere. A new pattern of social relations has to emerge before more symbolic forms can change. The Marxist approach identifies important ingredients in the understanding of popular religion.

At the same time there are decided weaknesses in these approaches as well. The most common one encountered is that economic relations do not always unilaterally determine religious consciousness. Religious consciousness is a complex phenomenon that does not admit of such easy explanation. There are cases where religious belief has transformed economic relations. One thinks of the Iranian revolution of 1979 as an example. Second, the Marxist interpretation does not adequately account for a style of popular religion in precapitalist societies, shared across class lines, such as that of the early Middle Ages. Here there is no significant difference in the religion of ruling class and proletariat. Third, religion can reflect things other than economic relations. One thinks here of how Polish popular religion is tied to nationalism and the effect that has had on the Polish economic and social situation.

POSITIVE APPROACHES

There are also a number of readings of popular religion that take a neutral or more positive approach to the question. Five of these can be mentioned.

1. *The Baseline Approach:* The baseline approach derives from social psychologists such as Robert Towler.[23] It starts from the assumption that every culture has to meet a certain number of social and psychological needs if the culture is to sustain itself. A number of these (belonging, security, dealing with the dead, access to invisible power) will be resolved in a symbolic con-

stellation, which becomes the religion specific to that culture. Every culture has this kind of response. In addition to these responses, another series of symbolic responses is developed that addresses the more metaphysical issues facing humankind in a way that cuts across cultural barriers. Questions about the meaning of existence and the problem of evil and suffering would fit into this series of religious questions and answers. This second series of responses finds expression in the great literate religious traditions of the world (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism). When this second series of responses comes into contact with the first series (the culture-specific religions), it selects some items from the first level for incorporation, reinterprets other elements, and so contextualizes itself in the culture.

With the baseline approach, popular religion is the first kind of religion in the culture, but one that has been reorganized by the entry of a world religion. From one point of view, what needs explanation in this scheme is not popular religion, but world religions. World religions become a specific derivative of the human religion-making function.

This approach would argue that popular religion could never be totally supplanted by the world religion; a certain baseline of human need will always have to be addressed. Moreover there is a limited range within which it can be transformed. For that reason any new religious form has the choice of remaining pure (and therefore small), or becoming universal (and having a popular variant of considerable magnitude). Even within renewalist movements like the Western sixteenth-century Reformation one finds the emergence again of such a popular religion.[24]

What are the strengths and weaknesses of this interpretive framework? A decided strength is that it takes popular religion as a phenomenon to be observed in its own right, not as a derivative from a world religion. It is neither derivative or deviant, but a phenomenon in its own right and of its own origin. It also helps to explain something of popular religion's resistance to change and certainly its resistance to annihilation—how elements of a people's baseline religion will survive for centuries despite the concerted efforts of religious leaders to extirpate them. The baseline-religion approach can also help to identify some of the basic human needs that any religious system will have to meet to win the adherence of a culture.

At the same time the baseline approach does have some shortcomings. First, the model seems to evidence a certain Western, industrial bias in that it sees religion primarily in terms of individual needs and behavior. It works out a decidedly psychological orientation that presumes an individualistic kind of culture. Second, while it reveals important insights into the nature of popular religion, and especially into its hardiness and perdurance over time, it does not provide a way of looking at it within the totality of culture and culture change.

2. *The Romanticist Approach:* There are two approaches to popular religion that could be called romanticist in their orientation. The first dates from nineteenth-century France, influenced by Jean Jacques Rousseau and the

Enlightenment.[25] This approach sees popular religion as the genuine religion of the people, but one that has been skewed by the church and its clergy. Were the restrictions and doctrines imposed by the church to be removed, a natural style of religion would emerge more conducive to the development and improvement of the human condition. Such a religion can be constructed by looking toward the popular religion among rural peoples and extracting from the popular religion those beliefs and practices commensurate with the natural human state of existence.

This kind of approach is too simple to attract many direct adherents today. Its bias is clearly against the church, and it assumes that popular religion has social organization of its own. A second problem is the lack of distinction between nature and culture. Religion is eminently cultural in form, and seemingly not the activity of the noble savage—if anywhere such might be found. While this approach does show some appreciation for popular religion, it seems to misconstrue radically the shape of culture and culture formation.

A second romanticist approach also owes its origins to the early nineteenth century, but more to Johann Gottfried von Herder than to the descendants of Rousseau. This approach, represented by theologians such as Juan Carlos Scannone,[26] starts with a unified and somewhat mystical concept of "the people" who are the subject of experience and cultural history. This concept of "the people" is incarnated especially in the poor majority who live a simpler and less alienated life. Their religious activity has definite and special value for the future of the human race because of their mystical relationship to this concept of "the people." Hence we need to listen to them closely in the process of the transformation of society. A study of their religion gives us special access to their vision of the world.

The advantage of this kind of approach is the seriousness with which it listens to popular religion in all its forms. It shows a deep respect for the poor majority who are the subjects of this history. A disadvantage is the romanticism of this view. Scannone not only sees the presence of the people in a particular culture, but envisions all of Latin America as having this mission to the rest of the church.[27] To see an entire continent as a single people disregards the genuine diversity of those people and carries strong chauvinistic overtones. A similar approach, which praised the German "people," was a major contributor to anti-Semitism and the rise of National Socialism in the 1930s, and such uncritical praise of "the people" can lead to such conclusions.[28] Liberationists also point out that the elements that are praised in this approach are particularly those which are oppressive to these same people and work toward their continued bondage. Besides lacking in cultural sophistication, this approach does not seem to provide the differentiation necessary to bring an end to the poverty and injustice that stalk so many of these privileged subjects of history.

3. *The Remnant Approach:* This approach sees popular religion surviving in a transformed man-

ner. In contemporary Europe, which has been evangelized for over a millennium, or in Latin America, which has been evangelized for four hundred years, two things are evident. On the one hand, traces and elements of the old religion have survived intact, even to the point of continuing as an independent system in parts of Latin America. On the other hand, elements of the older system have been incorporated into Christianity. Thus older shrines now honor Christian saints; old customs are incorporated into Christian celebration. This process of incorporation has been part of the Christian ethos since at least the time of Gregory the Great who, in his instruction to Augustine of Canterbury, urged him to keep all that was not in direct conflict with the gospel.[29]

One thing that experience has taught is that evangelization is a much more gradual process than was once believed. Elements of the older religion remain for generations, even centuries, although Christianity may have been enthusiastically embraced. This points again to the complexity of the religious response.

What perspectives on popular religion does the remnant approach offer? It certainly emphasizes that much of what we call Christianity is actually composed of elements absorbed from local religions. Thus the Christianity brought to Latin America in the sixteenth century not only interacted with the local American religions, it also brought along Iberian pre-Christian elements into the new situation. An important implication of the remnant approach is that there is no such thing as "pure" Christianity; a culture receives faith with an admixture of cultural and religious elements. This becomes particularly important for understanding the history of countries like Brazil, which first was exposed to an Iberian Christianity, and then later to a Romanization of its Christianity, a pattern repeated earlier in a slightly different fashion for many of the countries of northern Europe.[30]

At the same time a mere identification of surviving elements and introduced elements will not be particularly helpful in ascertaining future direction of popular religion in a culture. While the surviving elements may point to areas of need not addressed by Christianity, there is usually not enough coherence to indicate anything like directions that might be taken.

4. *The Subaltern Approach:* Subaltern approaches are inspired by the reflections of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and have had a major influence on the analysis of popular religion in Italy.[31] Gramsci varied the classical Marxist approach to religion and proposed that the religion of the proletarian (or subaltern class, as he termed it) could not be understood entirely as having been imposed by the ruling class. While this is sometimes the case, and while sometimes subaltern religion will mirror the religion of the ruling class, at other times the subaltern class will develop its own form of religion in opposition to the wishes of the ruling class as a way of maintaining cultural identity. The work of Eugene Genovese on United States antebellum slave religion would be an example of application of this approach.[32]

In this form of subaltern religion, forms are often borrowed from the ruling class, but are given different meaning and roles within the subaltern sys-

tem. In the case of the slave religion of North America, "crossing the River Jordan" did not refer to personal conversion, but to a wish to cross into the Free North. In the Caribbean and in Brazil, elements of Catholicism were wedded to Ibo and Yoruba religious systems of Africa to create new religious systems, which have by and large remained impervious to transformation by the ruling classes. They have remained a powerful source of identity to peoples in those areas; indeed, they often gain the adherence of rural peoples moving into urban areas in Brazil, the Caribbean, and North America.[33]

The subaltern approach highlights an important aspect of popular religion often overlooked, namely, that the symbolic world of a popular religion can provide one of the few resources of identity over which an oppressed people can exercise some control of their own. Pueblo peoples in the southwestern sections of the United States have used their old religion in this fashion, as a secret initiation transmitted to their children in order to maintain their identity in the midst of centuries of white domination. The secret, esoteric, inner side of subaltern religion can become the vehicle for liberation movements (such as the Mau-Mau revolts in East Africa in the 1950s) or can sustain people through long periods of silent suffering (such as the "hidden Christians" of Nagasaki during the Tokugawa period in Japan).

A second strength of the subaltern approach is that it sees popular religion as having an integrity of its own, which in turn implies an analysis somewhat independent of that of the religion of the dominant class. Its strength, its patterns of change, and its ability to endure have to be understood within the context of the subaltern class in its totality. A third strength that deserves mention is the extent to which the subaltern approach values the symbolic potential of popular religion, especially in its ability to forge identity for a people otherwise denied it by a ruling class.

The weakness of the subaltern approach lies not so much in what it does as in what it does not do. What of the religion of the ruling class and forms of popular religion to be found there? I would suggest that Gramsci's insight be extended to a wider context. One not only could investigate popular religion as a means of shaping identity with the subaltern class, but also could hypothesize that each class has its respective "popular religion." How religious activity is organized may have a lot to do with the resources available to a people. In other words, needs will cut across class lines, but response to needs will vary depending upon the resources available to a particular class. The invocation of the rubric of religion will vary across those lines, depending also on the resources available. Thus a poor family in South America may well know or understand how Western medical technology conceives of a certain disease, but if the resources of that technology are not available for responding to the disease, a vow at a shrine may be the only possibility open to them. In the same way different classes may have different responses to the same problem. A poor couple may light a candle to improve the quality of communication in their marriage, while their middle-class counterparts head for a weekend of Marriage Encounter workshop sessions.

This hypothesis suggests, then, that the same needs will receive different responses on different class levels. Some of the responses are rather clearly related to the amount of access to power that each class may have. The development of the small Christian community among the poor, with its Bible study, shows us how deeply evangelical popular religion can become. The quest of ever new spiritual techniques among the middle class in the United States shows us how unevangelical another form of popular religion can become. Because the popular religion of the middle and the upper classes tends to coincide with the religiosity of the clergy when it comes to the resolution of religious need, middle- and upper-class popular religion has not been recognized for what it is.

This hypothesis also provides a basis for explaining why Catholics who left their devotional practices behind in the wake of Vatican II became quite interested in charismatic renewal groups, in Marriage Encounter sessions, even in justice and peace issues. While the hypothesis does not account for the entirety of their interest, it does suggest that as people change class, or changes occur within a class, new forms of popular religion need to be found. The hypothesis of a class-specific popular religion can help us to respect the integrity of the variety of forms of popular religion, as well as help to identify the range of needs and solutions open to a society in the midst of social change.

5. *The Social-Psychological Approach:* Investigators in Brazil have addressed themselves to the phenomenon of Pentecostalism, the growth of the Afro-Brazilian cults, and what happens to rural religion when it comes into the city.[34] They would suggest as a model for understanding popular religion one that identifies social-psychological needs, and then sees how these interact with the economic, social, and political patterns in the environment. They trace much of the growth of urban cults to the problem of two cultures (Brazilian and European) not having achieved adequate integration. Edenio Valle, for example, suggests that the three doctrines of many Pentecostal groups—sanctification, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the awaited Second Coming of Christ—reflect three group-forming dynamics that account for the attractiveness of urban Pentecostalist groups to recent arrivals from the countryside. The doctrine of sanctification creates the sense of an elect group that allows its members to run away from the values of the bourgeois society whose resources are denied them. The doctrine of the gifts of the Holy Spirit gives them resources denied by that bourgeois society. And the imminent Second Coming justifies their gathering together in the city, despite their exclusion from the mainstream of urban life.[35]

This model is particularly useful in describing the kinds of change that popular religion sometimes undergoes in the move from the countryside into the city. It is less useful in helping to chart a pattern of change for the transformation of the situation for the disenfranchised, something that the Marxist model has been able to do more successfully. It also helps to explain the number and tenacity of conversions to new sects in Brazilian cities and pro-

vides a basis for the development of an explanation for similar situations elsewhere.

THE SEVEN APPROACHES IN SUMMARY

In summary, then, these approaches—two negative and five positive ones—provide distinctive ways of looking at the question of popular religion. Four of them make special contributions to understanding aspects of popular religion. If the observer is particularly interested in how a popular religious system blocks its participants from being freed from their oppression, then a Marxist model of explanation is the most helpful. If, on the other hand, one wants to discover what has made it possible for a people to survive an oppressive situation, then the subaltern approach is the most helpful. If one wants to locate which needs the popular religious system is addressing and meeting, then the baseline or the social-psychological approach is the most helpful. The baseline approach works better in rural settings; the social-psychological approach, in urban ones.

AREAS OF NEED AND POPULAR RELIGION

The seven approaches discussed in the previous section present seven frameworks for studying popular religion as a system. We can consider the question in a different way by looking at it from the point of view of the participants, rather than viewing the system as a whole. In this case, three sets of considerations need to be kept in mind.

1. *Psychological Considerations:* Questions of psychological needs are raised already in some of the approaches above, notably the baseline approach. One can pose the psychological question in terms of what an individual seeks from participation in popular religion.

The primary answer would be: access to power in times of crisis. In any one's life, situations arise that are of crucial importance to an individual or to a group, over which little or no control can be exercised. The ability to respond depends to some extent on the resources available in one's class situation, but there are certain situations—sudden serious illness, natural catastrophes—over which no one can exercise control.

As was indicated in the discussion of the subaltern approach above, those with little material power will be more likely to need to invoke divine power to come to their aid than will those who have access to other forms of help. A correlate of this is that one cannot hope to initiate change away from such invocations of divine power until alternate ways of getting at the needed power are identified and provided. Those alternate ways may be either through other symbolic ways within religion (such as moving away from the use of holy water to intercessory prayer), or through the realignment of economic resources to achieve the same ends.

A second need in the psychological area is for multiple and direct media-

tions of this power. This is evidenced in the multiplicity of saints who are invoked for a variety of needs, sometimes in a highly specialized fashion. For the poor and the oppressed, there is certainly an awareness of the awesomeness of the power of God, but those whose sense of self-worth has been continually abused by a ruling class will not presume direct access to someone so exalted as God. More human forms of access are needed. And a multiplicity is needed, should one mode of access fail. The immediacy of a saint and the tactility of an image make for a clearer sense of communication. In other classes, a person may collect together a variety of forms of spirituality to achieve the same relationship with God. What this means pastorally is that mediation is necessary, and the mode of mediation must be commensurate with other social relations in the life of the one seeking help.

This leads to a third consideration, namely, the integrative nature of the religious process. One psychological task of religious symbolism is to help make the world a meaningful place. One cannot interchange religious symbols casually as though they were interchangeable parts of different machines. Images of God, of Christ, of Mary reflect other social relationships in a person's life. The image of Christ as brother may work in a middle-class setting where one is in a position to initiate all kinds of voluntary associations, but not in class situations where the powerful are feared and distrusted.

2. *Social Considerations:* One of the major changes that can occur in the popular religion of an individual or a family happens when it moves from the country to the city. In other words, an alteration in social relations will call for changes in the religious semiotic system as well. On the surface it may seem that the social pressure of conformity to particular religious patterns, gone now in the city, was the major factor holding the popular religious expression together. But the reasons are often deeper. If the patterns of popular religion no longer give a symbolic unity to the rest of life, they can die. We are often caught in patterns of suggesting a rural spirituality with its emphasis on the unity of work, family, and social relations to an urban people who find work, family, and social relations as operating in quite different spheres. Religious universes crumble for a reason, and that reason is most often that they are no longer integrative of the rest of social relations.

By the same token, the Marxist analysts are probably right when they say that the world-view and patterns of popular religion cannot be changed without a concomitant change in the economic relations. Religious symbols will continue to mirror, however obliquely, other relationships with the lives of people. To change an understanding of God and ways of relating to him, there must also be a change in our understanding of social relations in that same world.

Finally, the pace of change must be commensurate on the sides of both popular religion and social relations. If social change comes too quickly, previous religious practice can collapse. If new religious practice outpaces social change, it can lead to utopianism, idealism, and cynicism. While the development is seldom entirely even, there is nonetheless a limit to the amount that the two can be separated in their mutual development.

3. *Religious Considerations:* Much of the analysis of popular religion given here has been from psychological and social dimensions. This could lead to the conclusion that religious considerations are reducible to either or both of these. But popular religion is more than a psychological or social reflex. It has its own deeper dynamic. If popular religion is a legitimate form of contextualization of the experience of God, then it cannot be reducible in and of itself to another reality. Its concreteness is reflected in its embeddedness in psychological and social relations, but the phenomenon is more complex than this. All religious behavior has need of multiple mediations, but it also springs from multiple motivations. Karl Rahner holds that alongside all these variegated psychological and social relations lies a deep-seated need for completion and salvation to be found only in God.[36] God is not just a psychological or social cipher, but represents a reality transcending the finitude of the human condition, a reality to which individuals in human society are called. That, too, cannot be forgotten.

For this reason, with real justification, Segundo Galilea has suggested that we see popular religion as a spirituality.[37] This term has become an acceptable one for describing the form of religion taken in the middle class; it should be extended to other classes as well. To think of popular religion as a form of spirituality allows us to appreciate its subtleties and its depths, while raising questions about its shortcomings and pursuing lines for its future development.

Finally, one must realize that conversion is a gradual and a concrete process. While a group may accept the words of the Scriptures rather quickly, the full apprehension of them can take a very long time. Even peoples who have been evangelized for centuries have difficulty hearing parts of the Scriptures or conforming themselves to the challenge of the gospel. The evangelization of most cultures has been selective at best—better at some things than at others. We should not be applying, therefore, criteria to the poor majority to which the rich minority are not willing to live up.

PASTORAL APPROACHES TO POPULAR RELIGION

One can agree with Michael Singleton that, in respecting popular religion in a culture, letting the people be is not the same as letting them alone.[38] To speak at all of a pastoral approach to popular religion implies that some sort of pastoral intervention is likely. Perhaps more than anyone else, Segundo Galilea has worked at developing pastoral approaches to popular religion.[39] These will be incorporated into some suggestions here:

1. A first principle to keep in mind is: Does the popular religion of a particular group need to be changed at all? For whom is it a problem? Often it needs change because the local pastor feels uncomfortable with the practice. If this is the only reason for a change, perhaps the change should be on the part of the pastor.

2. Religion is best understood as a way of life rather than a view of life. A religious world-view is reflective of a way of living. Recent literature in the Catholic area of Christianity is beginning to recapture the notion of Catholicism as a particular Christian ethos that expresses itself in sacramentality, multiple mediation, and concreteness.[40] What this means pastorally in terms of popular religion is that one must first look to what is done before one tries to understand what is said.

3. Popular religion is not just something for the poor and dispossessed, but represents the form of religion in a specific class. All the class relations have to be taken into account in assessing the meaning of religious forms and in initiating change to transform them.

4. Do the practices of popular religion enhance the identity of a group and bring it more into conformity with images of identity present in the Christian tradition? Do the practices lead to a challenge to adhere more closely to Christian values? Do they free members to be more Christian?

5. Do the practices of popular religion have the edge of judgment; do they open new horizons toward a fuller human existence? Where do they land on the question of justice?

6. Do the practices lead to a freedom commensurate with freedom as understood in the culture? "Freedom" is a culture-specific word; it can mean individual freedom to choose from a wide variety of resources, or it can mean fuller participation in the social complex of the culture. Westerners have to be particularly careful about imposing their concepts of freedom on others.

7. Do the practices help individuals to recognize the sin in their lives and in the fabric of structures in the community? How do the religious practices help to reinforce the best values of the popular religion?

POPULAR RELIGION AND LOCAL THEOLOGIES

One of the major tasks often faced in the developing of a new local theology is the question of dealing with the previous local theologies in the community. Often these theologies were brought along by those who did the first evangelization and became embedded in the popular religion of that community. Sometimes these previous local theologies continue to undergird a popular religion that hampers the general development of the community or hinders that development in more outright fashion. For example, the clinging of many African communities to pre-Vatican II patterns from the Roman liturgy hinders the development of a more authentic local response in prayer and celebration and may perpetuate patterns of colonialism at the same time. How does one change these patterns?

If one takes the considerations offered in this chapter and thinks back to what was said on this subject in chapter 2, one would conclude that it is unlikely that those patterns can be changed to any great extent in Africa until Africans are given back their own sense of identity and self-worth and until

they are allowed to look to their own culture as an ideal equal to that of Europe and white culture. That transformation depends to a large extent on a change in the economic relationships whereby the North Atlantic communities keep Africa in a state of underdevelopment. Keeping in Africans this sense of subservience and underdevelopment is necessary in order to maintain the relations of economic exploitation. Until this cycle is broken, it is difficult to change the popular religion involved.

One tool for changing that pattern has been the development of the small Christian communities. When people discover that their baptism gives them a voice in responding to the challenges of the gospel, when leaders listen to what their communities say in such circumstances, then the dimensions of the religious symbolic universe begin to shift as the people gain a sense of their own autonomy.

Local theologies are, in many ways, the expressions of popular religions. To develop local theologies, then, one must listen to popular religion in order to find out what is moving in people's lives. Only then can local theologies be developed and the liberating power of the gospel come to its full flower.