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The constructive use of 'vernacular religion'

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Abstract
The study of vernacular religion is often confined to the discussion of 'folk religion' in a rather derogatory and sterile manner. An attempt is made to correct this by describing seven ideal-typical ways in which vernacular religion can be studied and defined. The seven types or discussions are: 1) whether vernacular religion represents elitist or popular religious practices and the nature of New Religious Movements; 2) the study of cults and New Religious Movements; 3) vernacular religion as folklore; 4) Bellah's concept of 'civil religion' and its application to modern British culture particularly as it relates to public expressions of mourning; 5) ecclesiastical historians' use of the concept in historical studies; 6) Küng's use of paradigm as formulated by Kuhn, discussed in the context of two examples of modern usage of the term in vernacular religion; and 7) vernacular religion and modern hermeneutics as preachers attempt to relate local practices to their congregations. In order to use any combinations of these constructions in a positive manner, it is suggested that we develop a diagnostic technique which recognises that people have an inherent desire to discover ways of relating everyday experience to their religious expression. Such a method is developed using both Murphy and Tracy to show how attention may be paid to vernacular religion without succumbing to the trap of relativism.

Introduction
The purpose of this article is twofold: first, to try to outline the academic meaning of vernacular religion in order that we can display the richness of the concept; and second, to suggest a theological response to this rich concept which goes beyond sheer practicalities of ministry and responding to the world in which we live. 'Vernacular religion' is more often referred to as 'folk religion'. 'Folk religion' is often used as a derogatory term denoting common beliefs which have little or no foundation in theology or the doctrines of the church irrespective of denomination. Folk religion tends to be seen as anarchic by those who dismiss it because it creates the impression that 'anything goes'. To some extent this is true but we must reserve judgement in this article.

The implications of vernacular religion, our preferred term, are better known to practical theologians but there have not been many attempts to develop a systematic theology based on the observations on the existence of

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vernacular expression of religious sentiment within contemporary society. The contribution of Paul Tillich will be mentioned below, but a more modern approach would acknowledge the contemporary search for meaning and seek to add theological coherence in dialogue with vernacular religion.

Such a response, it will be argued, would create a diagnostic theology which could systematically build coherence in a very incoherent environment, but before this can be done we must outline the present academic state of vernacular religion. We will argue that there are seven ideal-types, or understandings, of the subject and that they must either be linked by common threads or rejected as superfluous to this project. These seven are multi-disciplinary in nature encompassing social anthropology, political science and various types of theology. They also are not exclusively Christian in reference and tend to cover the entire spectrum of beliefs from the main world religions through to 'New Age' expressions of belief and beyond to secular beliefs which retain a foundation in Christianity.

Typical uses and understandings of vernacular religion

Elitist versus folk religious practices

To many readers of this journal, there is a great beauty and purpose in pursing theology in a fashion which is elitist in that it is an esoteric discipline which is accessible only to those who are trained to be literate in theological matters. The word 'elitist' is used in a neutral sense to indicate that such theology is only available to a few and has been from the very beginning of the discipline. Vernacular religion is what people work out in their daily lives and in response to existential factors which are available to all. The matter of death has to be dealt with by everyone but everyday reflections do not attract the writings and thoughts which go into an academic theology of death and immortality. Watkins, in his study of British religion in the Middle Ages, doubts whether a bi-polar model of 'elitist' versus 'folk' religion actually works and suggests that historians might consider 'local religious culture' as a taxonomy instead.[1] As if to reinforce the elitist status of some groups, sociologists of religion have dusted down a concept from the 1960s and have started calling groups of influential people 'Virtuosos' to distinguish their unique historical or contemporary contribution to religious culture.[2] The dangers of elitist religion should not be confined to theological

[1] C. Watkins, '"Folklore" and "Popular Religion" in Britain during the Middle Ages', *Folklore* 115/2 (2004), pp. 140–50.

[2] See, for example, S. Sharot, *A Comparative Sociology of World Religions: Virtuosos, Priests, and Popular Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

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institutions but also to ecclesiastical practices which probably reveal most of the outworking of the dynamic between the two ideal-types.

Cultic and 'New Age' practices

The second type of vernacular religion follows closely from the first. It is well exemplified by Hiebert *et al.*[3] Hiebert and his colleagues place the problem firmly in the field of missiology and do so in the context mainly of the developing world but also draw conclusions for their own country of America. Folk religion extends beyond what they describe as 'higher' religions to take in sectarian activities such as Voodoo and the way in which it and religions like Macumba in Brazil exist in an almost symbiotic relationship with Roman Catholicism whilst impeding some of the newer Protestant missions.[4] They extend the meaning to include such things as alternative medicine in the United States and to the all-pervasive newspaper and internet horoscopes. The modern pastor should try to discourage members of their congregations from dallying with such distractions. They argue that the modern missionary looks at these practices objectively before dissuading congregations from indulging in them. By this, the authors mean that they seek to understand the aspects of life which these practices fill and replace them with fulfilling Christian beliefs. The main hope of their missiology is that people will move to a purer practice of Christianity when their hearts are changed by the gospel and conversion. This book touches on several of the other meanings of vernacular religion which will be mentioned below.

Folklorist's understanding of 'vernacular religion'

Before moving to the first truly academic study of vernacular religion, it is important to note that a shift in terminology from a potentially value-laden reference to folk religion to a more value-free approach. Following the events at Waco and the demise of the Branch Davidians in such a dramatic way, and in the wake of several other scandals in Europe surrounding cults, many writers have sought to avoid the use of the word 'cults' and to develop the New Religious Movements (NRM) model.[5] This avoids a condemnation,

[3] P. G. Hiebert, R. D. Shaw and T. Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999).

[4] S. Bramley, *Macumba: The Teachings of Marie-Josie, Mother of the Gods* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994).

[5] P. C. Lucas and T. Robbins, *New Religious Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Legal, Political, and Social Challenges in Global Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2004). Bramley, *Macumba*, and other writers developed their model inspired by authors like R. Stark and W. S. Bainbridge, 'Of Churches, Sects, and Cults: Preliminary Concepts for a Theory of Religious Movement', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 18/2 (1979), pp. 117–31.

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real or otherwise, of cults and investigates the growth of new movements of many different forms. This can also be witnessed in the work of Bowman and Sutcliffe in their collection of essays on 'New Age' phenomena.[6] Sutcliffe explains that they use quotation marks around 'New Age' because the New Age does not exactly exist as a movement but is a term which can be used as a means of problematising increasing numbers of 'small group practices' and a new 'discourse of "spirituality"'.[7] This may seem to herald a book which is an apology for 'New Age' thinking but is nothing more than an epistemological rejection of NRM as the only research tool. There is a considerable gulf between what is perceived to be the academic import of the early Celts in developing Greek scholarship and a high theology compared with the widely held view that the Celts developed an accessible and popular missiology which brought religion to people. The indications are that St Columba was rather an aloof figure in retreat on the remote island of Iona.[8] The point all these authors are trying to make is that NRMs are very often social constructs which do not serve much academic purpose but can feed myths in public perception. The churches' fear of 'New Age' religion is ill-founded until the generic term is broken down into individual components, some of which are undoubtedly harmful whilst others have sufficient foundation to be useful, as is the case with much complementary medicine when stripped of its mystic elements which the media and others would portray as 'New Age'. The point here is, if we are to move to an academic understanding of vernacular religion, we must avoid popular constructs which the church regularly uses to condemn practices which are not intrinsically malign but which are gradually being developed into new scapegoats for the churches' failures.

A major proponent of the scientific study of vernacular religion in the UK is the aforementioned Marion Bowman. Much of her work has studied the 'Celtic phenomenon' and the gravitation of other 'New Age' type institutions to Glastonbury which is but a few miles from her academic base in Bath.[9] Her recent study has been of 'Folk Bible' in Newfoundland and elsewhere. She

[6] S. Sutcliffe and M. Bowman (eds), *Beyond New Age* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

[7] S. J. Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 5. It may probably be assumed that most contributors to *Beyond New Age* would subscribe to Sutcliffe's argumentation.

[8] T. O. Clancy and G. Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995); W. G. Monteith, 'Iona and Healing: A Discourse Analysis', in Sutcliffe and Bowman, *Beyond New Age*.

[9] M. Bowman, 'Drawn to Glastonbury', in I. Reader and T. Walter (eds), *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1993).

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argues that people have always embellished scriptures with added material which gives extra meaning. For example, consider 'Adam's Apple': it is widely accepted as a myth that the lump in a man's throat stems from Adam choking on the apple which Eve gave him. There is no scriptural foundation for this and indeed no evidence that 'the fruit of the tree' was indeed an apple. 'Eve's Pudding' is further evidence that the idea of an apple is ingrained into our psyche with absolutely no foundation. The fishermen of Newfoundland took the biblical idea of naming the animals a stage further and have come up with a whole range of stories of how, for instance, haddock got its name.[10] This rich tradition of inventiveness is symptomatic of how ordinary people have always needed to develop an understanding of religion which has a coherence appropriate to their circumstance and time.

'Civil religion'

'Civil religion' is a concept that came to prominence in 1967 with the publication of a paper by Bellah which reflected on the inauguration speech of President Kennedy in which he invoked God as a symbol of the American way of life, the American religious life which at that time was basically Christian or Jewish with but a small emerging Islamic minority, or as a foundation of 'American Democracy'.[11] The roots of religious belief go far back into the constitutional history of America and whilst it entrenches a belief in God, the Constitution is more noted for its separation of Church and State. Bellah observes in later writing that America never had an established church and has allowed denominations and sects to flourish.[12] Some writers have objected to the characterisation of America as being dominated by a civil religion. Markham summarises these objections into three groupings. First, it has been argued that a civil religion is basically unhealthy, as indeed it was in Hitler's Third Reich; second, a civil religion is seen as a sign of secularisation and as a cosmetic way of covering up a lack of belief in God.[13] In recent

[10] M. Bowman, 'Vernacular Religion and Nature: The "Bible of the Folk" Tradition in Newfoundland', *Folklore* 114/3 (March 2003), pp. 285–95.

[11] R. N. Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', *Dædalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 96/1 (titled, 'Religion in America', Winter 1967), pp. 1–21. Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). At several points in this volume, Bellah makes clear his preference to be considered an Episcopalian churchman to a political theorist.

[12] R. N. Bellah, 'Is there a Common American Culture?', *Journal for the American Academy of Religion*, 66/3 (Fall 1998), pp. 613–25. This is a full review of academic literature relating to American religious pluralism.

[13] I. S. Markham, *Plurality and Christian Ethics* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 1999), pp. 67ff.

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years, discussion in America has been much more about freedom and the assault upon it by terrorists and one of the reasons for this may have been the neo-conservative agenda to mobilise the four million or so evangelical Christians who have not previously seen any necessity to be involved in the political process. They began to be wooed by President Reagan and the trend has strengthened and sophisticated under Bush. Third, some authors have questioned its existence at all. Civil religion cannot do anything, it does not serve any purpose and is of little use as a construct.[14] This latter argument may be even more persuasive when we consider the increasing dominance of fundamentalist Christianity in America.

British society has eluded such analysis mainly because our politics have thus far been devoid of religious conviction. Every mainstream party has so far avoided stating their policies in religious terms and even present discussions of the medical ethics surrounding genetic research and 'designer' babies has been mainly in a secular discourse. However, it can be argued that there is a kind of civil religion in the UK which comes to the fore at times of tragedy. Consider, for example, the confused discourse surrounding the death of Princess Diana or the compulsion to portray the church as praying at the time of the Soham murders or the numerous accidents that have claimed lives over the past decade. There is a widespread conviction that it is good 'to pray for the dead victims' and to intercede for the safe return of hostages in a way which shows a religious conviction which far exceeds the 10–13 per cent who attend church regularly. I shall return later to the confused doctrine which lies behind these convictions but for the moment it is important to note how strong the pressure is upon the churches, and increasingly the mosques, to respond to publicly perceived crises as they are developed and dramatised by a media which is desperate for 24-hour news – news which does not actually exist but has to be updated by padding every hour, for example, by interviewing clergy.

The mourning process surrounding the death of Princess Diana was such a unique demonstration of how a nation handles grief that it justifiably has exercised many academic studies.[15] There must be one outstanding conclusion: that the church is far from dead in Britain but is pivotal to the nation's self-expression. In many ways the funeral service brought together elements in the nation which had not previously come together: criticism of

[14] J. F. Wilson, 'A Historian's Approach to Civil Religion', in R. E. Richey and D. G. Jones (eds), *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 115–38.

[15] The many arguments surrounding such events and ensuing arguments of this paper are concisely reviewed by Grace Davie in 'Religion in Modern Britain: Changing Sociological Assumptions', *Sociology*, 34/1 (2000), p. 113.

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the royal family by Earl Spencer; the incorporation of popular culture into liturgy with the inclusion of Elton John; and the development of new modes of expression through the laying of flowers and the throwing of garlands at the hearse, customs which were imported from Oriental societies. There seems to be evidence that the churches learnt lessons from that experience and are now playing important ritualistic roles in all major occasions of grief.

Ecclesiastical history

The study of vernacular religion has also become very important in historical studies. Scribner has shown how the Reformation was coloured and moulded by simple propaganda at a time when literacy was still very low and the learned texts of the Reformers or even the Catholic theology which was current proved to be beyond most people. They had to depend upon the usual trappings of Catholic relics and visual images, often in the form of lithographs. Results in terms of miracles and the 'answers to prayers' were very important and the Reformers had to compete with these trends by producing their own propaganda which ranged far beyond their ecclesiastical and theological reforms.[16] The beliefs of common people were vitally important in providing the soil in which new religious movements could seed and grow. Wesleyanism grew out of the cracks in the Church of England in which dissatisfaction grew.[17] In the Catholic Church, there has long been a tendency to exploit popular beliefs which did not belong to the Church but which it appropriated over a period of time. The construction of Lourdes as a healing shrine is one such example: folk healing was a tradition of the Pyrenees where countryside lore prescribed cures associated either with plants or wells. After Lourdes became established as a place of vision, priests deliberately exploited tales of healing for the benefit of the Church and this exploration grew until the last decades of the nineteenth century when the idea of cures was institutionalised by the establishment of the Medical Bureau in 1883.[18] Lourdes is a good example of how an entire institution grew out of folk tradition and became established within the mainstream of the church. Interestingly, there was similar interest in folk cures in the highlands of Scotland which were recorded faithfully by parish ministers acting as local historians and antiquarians, but they never chose to exploit these practices to

[16] R. W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

[17] J. Wolfe, *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland, 1843–1945* (London: Routledge, 1994), ch. 4.

[18] R. Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1999).

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construct an ecclesiastical pattern.[19] The possible exception to this is on Iona where healing has become important, sometimes by exploiting island myths about the locality and historical records of Adomnán which romanticised the healing activities of St Columba and his fellow monks.[20]

Concept of 'paradigm'

It has become common to discuss Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in the context of vernacular religion but, whilst this has been creative in generating ideas, it somewhat lacks the rigour which a purist in the field of philosophy of science might demand. Before examining the proper use of the word 'paradigm' it is worth examining two popular uses of the term. Hiebert *et al.* use the term to refer to any popular belief held in the population which may be changed by conversion to Christianity.[21] They argue that there are common practices within the community which are incompatible with Christian belief but can only be dismissed by a sympathetic understanding of why people adhere to them and the implications of shifting their opinions when they become Christian. The problem with this theory is that it has appropriated the term and adapted it so loosely that it can refer to anything in society which is incompatible with Christian belief. As we examine the proper use of 'paradigm' it will become apparent that the concept only stands if it is closely and carefully defined. The second example comes from Richard Holloway, who has adopted a closer reading of Kuhn and also understands how it has been adopted by Hans Küng. The problem with Holloway is that, once more, he does not define his terms closely enough. He rightly suggests that, unlike scientists, theologians and popular Christian writers do not consign out-of-date paradigms to the realms of history but keep them very much alive. Thus, even today, Christians with an unshakable belief in the coming of apocalypse and the return of Christ stand in the same faith community as Roman Catholics or liberal Christians. Holloway seeks to suggest that we have moved on to a postmodern paradigm where faith is a matter of choice and all the myths of creation and resurrection have either died or been modified unrecognisably by Christians who pop in and out of the churches as choice dictates.[22] Although his formal contribution

[19] D. Hamilton, *The Healers: A History of Medicine in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1981), pp. 84ff. and M. Beith, *Healing Threads* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1995), pp. 36ff.

[20] M. Reith, *Beyond the Mountains* (London: SPCK, 1979), ch. 3. For a translation of *The Life of St Columba* see R. Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona: The Life of St Columba* (London: Penguin Classics, 1995).

[21] Hiebert *et al.*, *Understanding Folk Religion*, pp. 39ff.

[22] *The Sixth Paradigm* was developed from notes taken of a largely extempore address given at Cheltenham, UK, in May 2003, see (http://homepages.which.net/~radical.faith/

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is only posted on the internet, much of his recent writing has spelt out what a postmodern paradigm might look like and he clearly linked Kuhn's theories to his latest work in an unpublished lecture given to the Edinburgh International Book Festival in 2004. This again is a creative invention but stretches the essence of a paradigm beyond the limits set by its founder and as developed by Hans Küng.

First, a correction – Kuhn preferred to talk about 'paradigm shifts' rather than just 'paradigms' and did so within the field of formal science not within the community which the two previous writers have insisted can be an interpretation of his theories.

Kuhn argues that paradigms reflect 'an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community'.[23] However, the characteristics of a scientific community lie in its textbooks, formal experiments and the pressure of peer review. As such it is possible to define both the community and the nature of its beliefs in narrow terms which in turn define the paradigm shift. If such a narrow interpretation is taken of 'community' and of Kuhn's aims, it is very difficult to see how it can be applied broadly to modern societal beliefs in religion.

It is perfectly credible to believe that Küng did indeed offer a theological interpretation of Kuhn, but he did so within specific limits.

> Like natural science, the theological community has a 'normal science' with its classical authors, textbooks and teachers, which is characterized by a cumulative growth of knowledge, by a solution of remaining problems ('puzzles'), and by resistance to everything that might result in a changing or replacement of the established paradigm.[24]

Küng carefully defined his five paradigms in terms of the textbooks used or the problem-solving which was required. He offered four paradigms in the history of Christianity:

1st Paradigm – Apocalyptic Theology
2nd Paradigm – Hellenistic
3rd Paradigm – Roman period dominated by Aquinas
4th Paradigm – Reformation
5th Paradigm – Liberal Theology

holloway/sixth%20paradigm.htm). His latest book hints at the nature of such a 'paradigm': *Looking in the Distance* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2004).

[23] T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962 edn), p. 175.

[24] H. Küng, 'Paradigm Change in Theology: A Proposal for Discussions', in H. Küng and D. Tracy, *Paradigm Change in Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), p. 14.

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What is important is that each of these paradigms is bound by a) a historical period and b) a specific problem which had to be addressed, and c) each is characterised by textbooks which were produced by dominant theologians and philosophers of the historical period. It is unnecessary to describe each paradigm in detail but it is important to stress how much popular understanding of the term has done away with the need to closely define paradigms in the scientific way in which they were first conceived. If vernacular religion is going to appropriate Kuhn, let it be done in the precise way in which the logic of the concept demands.

Hermeneutics

There is a tenuous connection between the use of paradigms in the discussion of vernacular religion and the final example which is hermeneutics or, in this context, preaching, which when explained will provide us with a tool box from which to build a constructive use of vernacular religion.

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale has written a book which outlines the connection between preaching and the congregation in community in which the preacher lives and works. Congregations expect their pastor to understand the central issues in a community and to address them accordingly. The placing of local issues in a biblical context is the nature of theology and it is sometimes vital that this be localised. Evangelism without such sensitivity can be vacuous and provides little comfort to a congregation seeking reassurance and guidance as to how to conduct their lives as witnesses within their own community. Communities can indeed be regarded as subcultures, as all too often becomes apparent to chaplains in specialised institutions such as hospitals and prisons.[25] The import of her book is very different from that of Hiebert *et al.* in that she recognises the need to address ordinary issues within the community whilst they[26] prefer to dwell upon those issues which are in direct conflict with Christianity. Tisdale would argue that these conflicting issues would only be a small part of the global scene which faces congregations within their communities.

Summary

Seven different approaches or understandings of vernacular religion or folk religion have been surveyed and we now have to ask where they are compartmentalised in their own little discipline or meaning. The first two tend to use the terms in derogatory ways as if they are dealing with vulgar folk issues. This might disqualify them from further consideration

[25] L. T. Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).
[26] Hiebert *et al.*, *Understanding Folk Religion*.

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but, to be fair, what they offer is a method of dealing with very important issues which Christian missionaries might find hostile to their gospel of redemption. Nevertheless, they do not bear much consideration in a broader academic setting. The third understanding of vernacular religion involves 'civil religion'. It was undoubtedly necessary to invent a way of looking at what we would now regard as liberal politics in the America of the 1960s in an age before civil religion in the USA was circumscribed by conservative evangelicalism and Christianity was under siege from other militant faiths. The concept remains a useful tool to describe religion within certain societies, although probably not in America, and continues to provide insights into how the public would want to see religion develop. There is a close link between this type of analysis and the next one, historical studies, which very often considers how individuals made sense of religious change in the past.

We have seen the confused use of 'paradigm' in the literature and how it can refer to religious practice or to the higher disciplines of theology where it depends on an understanding of how the subject is taught, the books that are used and the constraints which are put upon normal theologians who have to address problems which occasionally require new and novel approaches which in themselves become paradigms shifts. Last, preaching brings us full circle in that local issues are addressed in ways which are true to the gospel, aware of local history and of current thinking and are addressed through pastors who wish to promote Christianity as the truth amidst competing puzzles which vex theologians and churchmen and women alike.

Synthesis

Those who discuss hermeneutics usually acknowledge the influence of Tillich and Niebuhr who were addressing a culture in the 1950s which still had a consensus about it which meant that Tillich was able to talk in general terms about the objective, yet subjective, depth of our being as a springboard for a theology relevant to the culture. He wrote:

> In the atmosphere of mere subjectivity of feeling without a definite object of emotion, without an ultimate content, religion dies. This also is not the answer to the question of religion as an aspect of the human spirit . . . Religion is the dimension of depth in all of them. Religion is the aspect of depth in the totality of the human spirit.[27]

Both the nature of the search and the freedom with which people can now choose their beliefs necessitates the more rigorous approach of Nancey Murphy and David Tracy.

[27] P. Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 7.

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I suggested at a conference in the Hague that what we needed to develop in the l970s was a tool which I called 'diagnostic theology' to bridge the gap between popular sentiment and established theological formulae. Whilst it would now be inappropriate to cling to such a term, it has the merit of a) being non-judgemental, and b) it implies that we must listen to voices within the community. Depending upon the nature of the investigation, any or all of these types of study of vernacular religion may be employed to illuminate the theological significance of a popular practice or statement. There are many more tools which can be used now both to help us understand these voices and to offer a way forward which does not fall into the trap of condoning a relativistic view that any religious view is immediately acceptable both to the church and to theologians. Hiebert *et al.* argue in much the same way as I did in the 1970s that believers are often aware of a constellation of 'facts' which are frequently erroneously connected or else bypassed resulting in false connections.[28] They believe that it is the task of the missionary and evangelical to connect these 'facts' into a coherent Christian belief system which eradicates mistaken beliefs and some of the connections that have been made by 'New Age' thinkers from Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy, and the various proponents of such misnomers as the 'Christ-Gift', or 'Experience' by David Spangler.[29] The response to vernacular religion which I wish to advocate, credits people with the ability to reason, a good will towards Christian doctrine and an appreciation of rational thought.

We can start from the premise that since David Hume all the religious beliefs have had a private element which promote and encourage personal inferences. Although Hume advanced these arguments against religion, Murphy begins her exploration of scientific deduction within Christian theology from this beginning. She later argues that 'The point of being a Christian is not first of all to acquire knowledge, but rather to be obedient to Christ.'[30] She believes that Christian truth is discovered with reference to traditions, the imitation of Christ and the investigations of theological truth may be guided by the scientific methods developed by Lakatos and other philosophers of science.

> I suggest that theology is a *rational reconstruction* of the beliefs of a Christian community. Its job is to examine the community's belief system in order

[28] *Understanding Folk Religion*, pp. 42ff.

[29] S. J. Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age*, p. 227 and his notes as a whole.

[30] N. Murphy, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Ithaca. NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 196.

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> to display the relations among its parts and its justification relative to whatever else there is.[31]

This suggests that theologians have an obligation to bring together people's diverse beliefs in a logical way which does not offend the traditions of Christianity but does allow innovation as we become aware of the various influences of vernacular religion which are affecting the public as they seek to make sense of the traumas which have such profound affects on our society and popular religion. It is for the theologian to decide whether a popular belief merits sufficient attention that it alters a current paradigm or not. David Tracey puts it thus:

> For if Christian theology is, in fact, the attempt to establish mutually critical correlations between an interpretation of the Christian tradition and an interpretation of contemporary experience, then it becomes vital to reflect on what interpretation itself is and how this affects every interpretation of religion and especially every theology within the new historically conscious paradigm.[32]

If we have regard both for the tradition of the church and the way people work out their understanding of spiritual matters, how can we diagnose the strengths and weaknesses in their common assumptions? By taking the issue of public mourning as an example we may explore some of the issues. There are basically sociological and theological issues. Many have written volumes about the mass hysteria surrounding Diana's death and the 'victim' culture, from prominent Conservative politicians to puritanical left-wing thinkers – and squandered reputations by so doing. If the mourning culture belongs to civil religion it must be asked whether that term actually describes anything at all. It is for disciplines other than theology to decide whether there is any more than the criteria of preference which can decide whether this culture is a defining feature of modern society or not. However, given that statements are being made that involve theological assumptions, these must be pursued and diagnosed in such a way that we either capture the public's imagination or correct it.

We often see headlines, 'Prayers were said for the [dead] victims of the accident'. Such a statement is open to various interpretations. 1) The journalist is saying no more than that prayers of comfort are being offered for all who are associated with those who have died. The journalist is guilty of

[31] Ibid.

[32] David Tracy, 'Hermeneutical Reflections in the New Paradigm', in Küng and Tracy, *Paradigm Change*, p. 35.

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nothing more than headline shorthand. 2) The journalist is actually reflecting a public belief that prayers should be said for the dead. It is, of course, central to Reformed Christian belief that prayers are not said for the dead and that they, in turn, do not intercede for us. In the spirit of diagnostic theology, we must explore the best way to respond to the headlines in an instructive manner. Two questions must be asked: is Protestant doctrine so out of touch with public beliefs that we must now rethink our position, or alternatively, must pastors and theologians react in ways which will correct misunderstandings with theology even if that must cause pain to many? A less extreme method of examination might be to deconstruct the secular discourse to test the utterance for a) religious intent or formal context; b) whether the author is making a statement which is intended, directly or indirectly, to force the pace of theological debate; or c) the statement and context are amenable to correction in a very public arena.

If we decide that such mistaken beliefs must be corrected, this goes straight to the heart of the way in which we use our knowledge of vernacular religion. Preaching does indeed become a reaction to local and national culture and, by addressing the subject of traumatic loss, pastors can point congregations in different directions. If the case, on the other hand, is that the church is totally out of touch then it is up to theologians to suggest ways in which modern beliefs can be assimilated into the church's traditions. This may indeed be what is happening as we find the pastors who are involved in these tragedies gradually rewriting theology from without the walls of academia and leaving the intellectual discipline behind.

However, they do so at their peril. Theology must aim at producing a rhetoric which both captures the truth and offers adequate rhetorical tools to reflect, and correct, public expressions of scantily worked out religious sentiment. Such would be the tension of a rigorous diagnosis of modern populist statements of religious conviction which are made without the constraints of a strong Christian tradition to guide the way such statements are formulated and become part of the belief system of today which has even less consensus than in the days of Paul Tillich.

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