

**THE
PLACE OF POPULAR RELIGION IN THE
SYSTEM OF WORSHIP AMONG THE
CREOLES OF MAURITIUS**

by
DANIEL DAVID MANIQUE C.S.Sp.

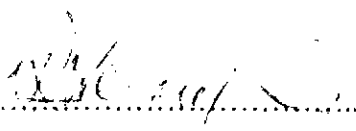
Moderator:
BENSON A MULEMI, MA. (Anthrop.)

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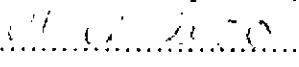
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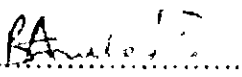
DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this Long Essay has not been submitted to any other Institute or University for academic credit. All sources have been duly acknowledged.

Signed: .....

Daniel David Manique C.S.Sp.

Date: .....

MODERATOR: .....

Mr. Benson Mulemi, MA. (Antro.)

Date: .....

DEDICATION

I gratefully dedicate this work to my parents, Mr. Gabriel and Mrs. Gisèle Manique through whom I came to be and who have brought me up in a decent atmosphere of love. My dad has died since, may the Almighty God grant him eternal rest.

I also extend this dedication, in a special way, to the whole Creole community which is trying to mould together an identity of its own.

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ABSTRACT

It is quite evident that popular religion or belief holds an important place in the life of any Mauritian or in the texture of the Mauritian society. Why do Mauritians think that popular religion is an answer to the ultimate problem of life? Religion plays an important role in shaping the character of a person within the milieu of the multi-racial and pluri-cultural set up of the Mauritian society. As regards the religious worldview, Mauritius offers a diversity of belief systems which is a mosaic made up of Muslim, Christian and Hindu faiths. Harmony and crossbreeding are two characteristics of religion in Mauritius.

Indeed, we have to talk about popular religion, for it is an ubiquitous reality among the Mauritians. No one can bypass this reality, neither the Catholic Church, nor the other churches. The main questions in this essay are: should the Church support popular religious beliefs and superstitions and make tolerate what represents the display of popular sentiment? Or should she refuse to recognise the basic inadequacy of such beliefs and offerings? How can the church inculcate the good news of Jesus Christ who alone can provide genuine comfort, assurance and hope in such a context? The other questions that form the main focus of to this paper are as follows: Why do baptised Catholics, particularly the Creoles, who have received proper catechesis, take recourse to popular religion when faced with a problem that goes beyond their control? What makes the Creoles unsatisfied with the established institutional religion, namely, the Christian faith?

Nothing has been said or written in an official way before about this, but for a very good reason, the Diocese of Port-Louis in Mauritius in 1993 conducted an anthropological study of the religious

attitudes of Catholics among the Creole community.¹ The fundamental intention of this anthropological research by the diocese is expressed by the Bishop of Port-Louis, "...*first to have a deep and better understanding of popular religion as it presents itself among the Creoles in Mauritius so as to give a basic meaning of pastoral initiation of adults into their Christian faith. It is also to understand better the popular milieu in order to love them, and to be able to communicate to them.*"²

For those born in a 'Creole' family, daily life is coloured by all kinds of beliefs, superstitions, rituals and practices. Features of popular religion include a pattern of the belief in and practice of magic and superstitions. These things are very often mixed with the Catholic faith.

This paper strives to provide a reflection on religion among the popular Creole masses through an analysis of what has already been done by some researchers. To situate popular religion in its real cultural context, the perspective taken here is mainly from the author's own experience as member of the Creole community. In this paper, we will give a brief overview of the formation of the population of Mauritius with regard to its genesis as well as the existing religious environment, which has shaped the beliefs and practices of the Creoles. Then, we shall attempt to define popular religion and to show how it presents itself in the Creole socio-cultural context, and how people of this community consider it to be a response to their quest for happiness, as well as for a successful

¹ Diocese of Port Louis, Mauritius, "Mo Pas Croire dans ça banne Zaffaires là, Mais le Mal Existe", In: A Research among the Creoles Milieu about Popular Religion, Port-Louis, 1995.

² The Right Reverent Bishop Maurice Piat, Bishop of Port-Louis, Mauritius, in his speech to the clergy on 22nd June 1993.

life. We shall give a brief introduction to religion, including rites or rituals, and finally give an account of the different practices that prevail in this community. After that, we will conclude by presenting the pastoral approach to this phenomenon, examine what ought to be the response of the Church and finally we shall provide a concluding reflection.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The concept “popular religion” is derived from the discrepancy between an official Christian proclamation of faith and religion and the religion as “lived” by the people, that is, the general masses of the faithful. This religion varies in form and content in relation to socio-cultural experiences of different people in their own environments.

1.1.1 HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF MAURITIUS.

The island of Mauritius occupies a strategic location in the south-west part of the Indian Ocean as far as its maritime route is concerned. In fact, it is known as the Star and the Key of the Indian Ocean. It is a tiny island, twenty degrees south of the equator and one thousand kilometres off the east coast of Madagascar. Africa is the nearest continental land mass to Mauritius Island. It is sixty-five kilometres from north to south and forty-five kilometres east to west. Politically, Mauritius is considered to belong to the continent of Africa though it does not have strong cultural ties with it.

1.1.2 THE MAURITIAN PEOPLE

The population of Mauritius according to the 1993 census was estimated to be 1,106,516.³ Approximately two-thirds of the people are Indian immigrants and their descendants. People of mixed African and European descent, known as Creoles, constitute less than one-third of the total population. Chinese and European minorities also exist. The majority of the Indo-Mauritians are Hindus and the rest are Muslims. Most of the Creoles are Roman Catholics.

Mauritius is a “prism of infinite variety: thus can be summarised the rich texture of the Mauritian society.”⁴ It is remarkable in its ethnic diversity. The Mauritian society is woven from multi-cultural threads and it is a melting pot of Europe, Africa and Asia and a microcosm of the world’s great cultures. This has produced a “ ‘heady’ brew of races, languages, religions and eating habits.”⁵

The Indo-Mauritian group of Indian descent carries seventy percent of the total population of Mauritius. The “General Population” comprising of Franco-Mauritians or ‘the White’ and Creoles are of mixed origin, but principally of African descent. They account for twenty-five percent of the total Mauritian population while the people of Chinese origin are the minority. These are the four main ethnic groups that make up the people of Mauritius. From these groups of people, the four major religions of Mauritius are derived: fifty-two percent of the total population are Hindus

³ Mauritius, Microsoft (R) Encarta. Copyright (c) 1994 Microsoft Corporation , Funk & Wagnall's Corporation.

⁴ Dinan, Monique, The Mauritian Kaleidoscope: Languages and Religions, Port Louis: Best Graphics Ltd, 1986, p. 1.

⁵ Ibid, p. 1.

(Indo-Mauritians); while eighteen percent are Muslims.⁶ The Creoles and the Whites who are termed as the “General Population,” are mainly Christians. The Chinese are either Catholics or Buddhists. Mauritius, therefore, is a kaleidoscope of people.

Although English is the official language, the Mauritian people also use French and Creole, which is “a French based language, with an admixture of East African and Malagasy vocabulary.”⁷ English became the official language when the British occupied the Island of Mauritius in 1810, putting an end to French colonisation. However, French remains the predominant language, exerting a strong influence on the economic and social mobility of all ethnic groups. Nonetheless, Creole is the mother tongue of the Mauritians and Bhojpuri (a sort of Creole Hindi), is spoken by a wide section of the Indo-Mauritians. Some minority groups also speak other languages such as Tamil, Telegu, Urdu, Marathi and Chinese.

In Mauritius, the term *Creole* no longer refers to the indigenous natives of European descent. It refers to a Mauritian who is neither a “pure” European descendant, nor an Indian, nor a Chinese, but a mixed-blood or a coloured person. However, this term seems to mostly apply to a coloured person who is closer to a White rather than to a Black. Moreover, independently of the nuances of the skin, the coloured man has a social status.”⁸ A political history of Mauritius throws light on how all these people came to Mauritius and how they managed to live in harmony and peaceful interaction with each other, while they still clung ardently to their varied norms, cultures, customs

⁶ Boodhoo, Sarita, Kanya Dan: the Why's of Hindu Marriage Rituals, Mauritius: Mauritius Bhojpuri Institute, 1994, appendix 729.

⁷ Dinan, Monique, The Mauritian Kaleidoscope: Languages and Religions, Port Louis: Best Graphics Ltd, 1986, p.9.

⁸ Nagapen, Amédée, Histoire de la Colonie Isle de France - Ile Maurice 1721-1968, Diocèse de Port-Louis, 1996, p.190.

and traditions, rituals, religious and moral values. Interestingly, only the Creoles have adopted both the European norms and Christian values. Most of the ethnic groups have retained their distinct ethnic identities in a pluri-cultural and multilingual set up. All the groups have some cultural ties with their original homelands.

The Creoles, however, have no direct links with either Mozambique or Madagascar, where most of the slaves came from. But since the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery and coming of ‘indentured’ Indian immigrants to Mauritius in 1984-1985, the African Cultural Centre (*Centre Cultural Africain*) has been set up. There has been a conscious effort to establish more links with the African Continent which was the source of the Mauritian slave trade.

The Creoles, conscious of the role they played during the colonial and the post independent period, strive to mould their identity. The sense of identity creates a strong sense of belonging, which in turn fosters respect from other groups. Although, being a minority group, the Creoles cannot be prevented from playing their roles in the country’s development. They have made a substantial contribution to the development of Mauritius. However, being immigrants, the Mauritians have cultivated to a high degree the feeling of belonging to somewhere else. Unlike other groups, such as, the Indo-Mauritian, the Chinese and as well as the Franco-Mauritian, the African descendants do not have closer links or ties to the land of their ancestors, to their traditional religions, to their languages and to their cultural elements, because of the different circumstances in which they had found themselves during slavery.

The abolition of slavery brought an urbanisation of the freed slaves. They established themselves as artisans, wage labourers and provided domestic service. Labouring on the sugar plantations carried the stigma and horror of their dehumanising treatment at the hands of their former masters. They turned their backs on the hardships and agony of plantation life for good. As they moved to the towns, they adopted the predominant European life style and Christianity which then became the norm for the freed slaves. However, they never intermarried with the Whites although they practised the same religion and belonged to the same community. As such, they formed a distinct ethnic identity from the white settlers.

Looking at Mauritians today within this multi-racial and pluri-cultural set-up, one immediately would say that Mauritians might have come from three continents, that is, Europe, Asia and Africa. Mauritius actually had no indigenous population because the inhabitants are all descendants of contemporary immigrants.

1.1.3 AN OVERVIEW OF MAURITIAN HISTORY

Although it has been populated for less than 400 years, Mauritius was probably visited by the Arabs before the 10th century, the Malays in the 1400s, and the Portuguese in the early 1500s. It was occupied in 1598 by the Dutch, who named it after Maurice of Nassau, then *stadtholder* of the Netherlands. The Dutch left in 1710, and in 1715 the French took possession of the Island, renaming it *Île de France*. It was captured by the British in 1810 during the Napoleonic Wars and was formally ceded to Great Britain in 1814.⁹

⁹ Mauritius, Microsoft (R) Encarta. Copyright (c) 1994 Microsoft Corporation, Funk & Wagnall's Corporation.

Mauritius acquired its first inhabitants when the Dutch settlers claimed the Island and named it after their ruler, Prince Maurice van Nassau. After years of occupation they abandoned the island to pirates, leaving behind a few hundred ex-slaves of African and Asian origins who had ran away to the mountains. Most of the 'maroon' slaves as they were called, were stranded in the wooded mountains of the south west and remained a source of trouble later to the French settlers. In 1710, the Dutch abandoned the island due to the scarcity of food, mismanagement and frustration.

The French, as a European power in the Indian Ocean, took possession of the island in 1715 and changed its name from Mauritius to *Isle de France*, under the governorship of *Mahé de Labourdonnais* who came from Pondicherry, a French colony in India. Slaves were imported from Madagascar and Africa to till the virgin lands for sugar-cane plantations in Mauritius. The island became prosperous in agriculture and developed as a French naval base of prime importance.

This was considered by the British as particularly harmful, especially to their commercial interests in India. As a result, the British launched an attack on the French territory and took possession of the Island in 1810. The 1810 capitulation of the French was made on one term and condition; that the French would retain their language and culture and that the British would not interfere with the control of the economy which had become by then quite well established. The Island by the time of the British occupation had a French population, a few British settlers and slaves or their descendants.

After the abolition of slavery in 1835, in all British colonies, the Africans or their descendants no longer wanted to work in the sugar cane plantations which by then was a lucrative business. This resulted in severe shortage of labour on the sugar estates. To offset the labour problem

arising from abolition of slavery in the British Empire, the planters were allowed to import “indentured” labourers from India. Since 1861, the population of migrant labourers were mainly Indian. Regular indentured labour immigration from India began in 1835.

1.2 POPULAR BELIEF SYSTEMS

To be human is to hold some sort of system of belief. We may be largely unaware of the beliefs that are at the root of much of our thoughts and actions. In this regard, therefore, we all believe in something. Most of us are prepared to say what we think about the great institutions of society, such as marriage, education, law and order. But such views are not held in a vacuum. Each of them is an element of the total pattern of our system of belief, that is, what we hold to be of greatest value.

How do we come to the beliefs we hold? Are they the products of our individual thinking? Few would deny a real personal factor, but all of our beliefs are shaped to a greater or lesser extent by the whole wide context of people and events that surround us from birth and during the various stages of life until death.

1.3 THE CONCEPT OF POPULAR BELIEF

Popular belief or popular piety is often misunderstood because of the different meanings attached to it. It is very common in religious circles to employ terms like popular piety, popular religion, or popular devotion. Somehow it seems that there is a split between what some sections of the faithful believe and what the Church teaches. The faithful comprise a trained section that are called

the 'initiates' and an untrained ones known as the 'uninitiated'. The 'initiates' constitute an elite group such as the clergy, while the 'uninitiated' are all the ordinary and uncritical believers who believe things at their face value. They are those who '*do not know*' as opposed to those who '*know*'. It is not something strange to see that popular piety co-exists with the Church's liturgy and worship.

The term 'Popular' implies a distinction that is often left implicit. The implied contrast is made explicit in the French dichotomy: "*foi savante and foi populaire*," that is, a learned faith versus popular belief. Since these terms deal with faith and its expression, it must be asked: What is the meaning of popular religion or popular belief?

Popular religion refers to the religious observances and forms of prayer or worship among the '*uninitiated*'. It is a response of the '*uninitiated*' to decrees, prescriptions, and behavioural requirements transmitted by the elitist circle of religious '*initiates*', and integrated with "unofficial" systems of belief in local context. However, particular forms of expressing beliefs may have little, if anything, to do with the quality, intensity, or sincerity of belief. Indeed, forms of prayer and devotion that might appear inept or even superstitious to some might be more sincere attempts to express faith than those of the learned.

Popular religion which also includes popular piety, has primarily been seen under the rubrics of superstition, supernaturalism, spiritualism and even magical realities¹⁰. Surprisingly, popular religion remains a universal phenomenon. It is indeed found everywhere in the world and

¹⁰ "La Religion Populaire et Reforme Liturgique," *La Maison-Dieu, Revue Pastorale Liturgique*, No. 122, p.10.

Mauritius is not an exception. The concept of 'popular religion or piety' itself is confusing. This compound word precisely lacks a clear meaning. Does 'popular' indicate what is elaborated or cultivated by the people or does it point to a phenomenon of the masses which they traditionally used and lived by? In this essay the term "popular religion" stands for religious practices which are perceived as being opposed to the official Catholic religion. The term 'Popular', if it is not used pejoratively, can mean: "simply 'of the people', for popular religion is the essence of what the people of God are actually doing to express their faith."¹¹

Popular religion and its expression, often seem to be based on people's **religious feelings and needs**, often immediate and short-term. It looks at times as if God and the Saints are used for the person's purpose and plan. It is regarded as a creation of the people themselves; it is in accordance with their religious sentiments and does not challenge them.

It is, therefore, nourished from the context of the respective culture: ethnicity, public and private sex roles, type of employment of a social class, and the geographical location of the people either in the countryside or in the city. It is considerably moulded by the living tradition of the family, which, as the primary agent of socialisation, mediates religious perceptions, motivations, patterns of behaviour, and religious convictions that become anchored in the subconscious of the person.

Faith, above all, is a gift from God which none of us deserves, yet, God wants a person through his grace to give assent to him. It is, therefore, possible for everyone to possess faith in God for it is a

¹¹ Gittins, Anthony J., Bread for the Journey: The Mission of Transformation and the Transformation of Mission, New York: Orbis Books, 1993, p.143.

gift from God which one can accept or reject. It is essentially the same in every one who has it. In relation to the gift of faith, a believer, a priest, a nun, a seminarian, a theologian, a Christian or a non-Christian who has a genuine religious experience are all on the same level.

There may however, be some differences in the level of religious expression. The differences are due to a number of practical realities such as, education, cultural background and, obviously, result from the religious instruction one gets. Those who receive a theological education, for instance, are likely to come to an understanding of this gift of faith and its giver in a more intelligible way. However, an ordinary believer who is unable to articulate this gift and is not at all weak in his or her faith as such, is no less faithful than a person who can give it a theological expression. The question here is, who can really and sincerely know God? Even the learned formulations of some of the most articulate theologians fall short of understanding the Supreme Being who is beyond human comprehension. On the level of faith and its expression, everyone, regardless of talent or position, is on the same level, a level we might designate as “popular”, which is human and fallible in relation to God.

1.4 POPULAR RELIGION IN THE MAURITIAN CONTEXT

Having given a general exposé on what popular belief is as opposed to the learned faith, let us see how this reality emerges in the Mauritian multi-cultural context. It is a fact, that popular belief without its excesses, reflects a people’s desire to respond to God with gratitude for the gift of faith he has given to them. Human beings are relatively powerless in controlling their destiny. Despite

their best-laid plans, sicknesses, natural disasters and other circumstances beyond their control make the future very uncertain. This is to say that life is one big puzzle to many people. Not only do religions provide emotional support to face the uncertain and hostile future, but also does popular religiosity.

“Popular” religion as well as “official” religion have a psychological component. This component particularly helps human beings to give an understandable meaning to events which are mysterious and over which they have no control. In fact, these events which are connected to ‘the next world’ are believed to pertain to ‘bad spirits’ and evil forces. Among most Mauritians, evil divinities are believed to coexist with other good spirits. Popular religion, therefore, focuses the human quest on the issues of *suffering, life and death* as does the Catholic Church which constitutes the “official” religion. A Mauritian who is in search of an answer to his or her ultimate questions, and finds that the Catholic Church seems unable to give answers, will find his or her own answers in popular religion.

The perceptions of life, death, suffering or “bad luck” determine human behaviour. In Europe nowadays, religious practice is not so much a part of the European life. People are no longer seeking meaning in Christian religion. But what they have given up during their lifetime, come back again when suffering and pain raise the problem of preservation and survival or loss and destruction of their existence. Many sceptics turn in their last moments in life to seek comfort in religion, that is, they look for a practical answer to their problems and for even more answers to the question of salvation. In the same way, the Africans who are fundamentally religious return to

their traditional way of worship and behaviour whenever the problem of death and suffering arises. In fact, Mauritian Creoles look for the blessing of their ancestors who left the people with their 'practical solutions' to the ultimate problem of this world. Even those baptised in the Christian churches seek the so called practical solutions. Among the Bantu for instance, "life and death are the great apostle of fidelity to a magical view of life and of recourse to traditional practices."¹² In no way, can human beings by-pass this reality of searching for a 'truth'.

Mauritians who practise popular religion tend to be superstitious because of their cultural background and the belief in what has been termed as, "*La religion de la nuit*", that is, "the religion of the night". This is manifested in the practice of witchcraft, magic and sorcery. Popular religion is "often subject to the penetration of many distortions of true religion, and frequently remains at the level of forms of worship not involving a true acceptance of faith. It can even lead to the creation of sects and endanger the true ecclesial community and hence, it is very close to superstition."¹³

The word superstition primarily means a 'wrong' faith, a 'sham' or deficient faith. But Karl Rahner has also added that what will be called superstition in any particular case depends on the outlook of the observer. He continues: "Any religion or world view is tempted to dismiss as superstition manifestations of a belief. Within Christianity superstition means either misinterpreting important parts of the Gospel in a magical sense or obscurely clinging to elements

¹² Tempels, Placide, *Bantu Philosophy*, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1969, p. 18.

¹³ Rahner, Karl, *Encyclopaedia of Theology*, London: Burns and Oates, 1975, p. 1652-1654.

of paganism (natural religion) in Christian practice, or else abusing the forms of Christian faith in a flight from the insecurity of life and from the decision it demands of us.”¹⁴

Superstition is a belief or a practice which is generally regarded as irrational and as resulting from ignorance or from fear of the unknown. It implies a belief in the unseen and unknown forces that can be influenced by objects and rituals. Magic or sorcery, witchcraft, and the occult in general are often referred to as superstitions. Examples of common superstitions include the belief that “bad luck” will strike the person when a black cat passes in front of them or that some tragedy will befall a person who walks under a ladder. Good luck charms, such as horseshoes, rabbits' feet, coins, locketts, and religious medals, are commonly kept or worn to ward off evil or to bring good fortune.

In general, superstitious practices and beliefs are most common in situations involving a high degree of risk, chance and uncertainty and during times of personal or social stress or crises, when events seem to be beyond human control. Superstition and magic may offer an apparent security, which silences the real questions of life before they are dealt with at all. Superstitious elements are inevitable in any religion because of its transcendental character. People in search of God attach themselves to what is safe and pleasant. Superstition distorts people's view of the absolute sovereignty of God, since it is inspired by the idea that by their own expert ritual words and acts, they can control the god or the forces on which they feel their confused existence is depending. Sometimes people even hide those ritual words and acts from a god whom they fear. This is a sort

¹⁴ Ibid.

of egocentrism, which precludes religious confidence as it looks for everything from God's absolutely free power and goodness.

The superstitious worldview offers a security which protects people's lives as well as spares the person's intellectual effort and commitment. Superstition, therefore, is one of the factors that make it difficult or impossible for a person to develop his religious, moral, and social personality. It is always a symptom of personal crisis and in this sense, superstition is very close to popular piety.

The poverty and shallowness of what superstition has to say about the foundation of human existence, prevents people from having real faith which would overcome fear, doubt and despair. Christian faith constantly challenges the person, so that the danger of superstition is avoided. One can easily become mechanical, using signs and symbols without any concrete meaning attached to them. Since superstition is not at the level of mature faith, in the sense of constant renewal of the relationship with God, it often becomes an element of popular piety. Precisely, superstition occupies a major role in popular religion, beliefs and practices in Mauritius and others socio-cultural contexts.

CHAPTER TWO

CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOUR AND PRACTICES IN MAURITIUS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Tourists who visit Mauritius generally express their surprise that Europe, Africa and Asia seem to have arranged to meet on this tiny Indian Ocean Island. More than the racial cross-breeding which characterises Mauritius, the visitor is likely to be surprised when he or she discovers that a Creole, an Indo-Mauritian, a Muslim and a Sino-Mauritian co-exist very fraternally with each other. While in other parts of the world faith divides people, Mauritius offers the proof that worship in diversity is a societal phenomenon which does not automatically result in war among the diverse groups with varied religious experiences and behaviour. However, "any meeting of two different realities incurs the risk of conflict."¹⁵ This can happen when two people with different beliefs meet. There can be clashes of values because of mutual inconsistency. Very often we are not open to other cultures or we are not ready to learn from others. Such ethnocentrism has led to religious conflicts in areas like Northern Ireland and Southern Sudan.

2.1.1 THE MAIN RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS AND CROSS-BREEDING OF RELIGIONS

Since the origin of Mauritian people is rooted in three continents, the Mauritians celebrate a variety of religious festivals. Besides the Christian celebrations, such as Christmas and Easter, each month has at least one more religious festival.

¹⁵ Mulago, Vincent, "Traditional African Religion and Christianity" In: Olupona, Jacob K., ed., African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society, New York: Paragon House, 1991, p. 128.

The Thaipoozam Cavadee is celebrated by the Tamil people. During this festival one observes processions of devotees, with their bodies pierced with fine silver needles, carrying the *Cavadee*¹⁶ on their shoulders, after fasting for ten days. This feast is to render homage to the god 'Muruga' for the blessings and graces received. On the other hand, *the Chinese Spring Festival (Chinese New Year's Day)*, which is associated with thundering fire crackers and the traditional Chinese Dragon, marks the first season of the year. It is a family banquet in honour of the ancestor and the living members of the family who assemble from distant places to affirm their identity.

The Maha Shivaratree is a very important Hindu celebration. In honour of the god called Shiva, thousands of pilgrims from all over the island, dressed in white and carrying 'kanwars' (decorated bamboo structures) on their shoulders, walk to Grand Bassin, a lake situated in the south, to fetch holy water and to purify their bodies. There is also *the Id-Ul-Fitr* which marks the end of the Muslim month of fasting, the Ramadan. *The Father Laval Remembering Day* on the 9th of September brings people of all faiths to the shrine of this Catholic Saint in Port-Louis, the Mauritian capital. November sees the lighting up of thousands and thousands of small oil lamps or electric bulbs in the gardens of those celebrating *Divali*, the victory of Rama over the evil Ravana, also symbolising the victory of goodness and joy.

Devotion is another characteristic of Mauritian popular religious belief. Mosques, churches, temples, various shrines and pilgrimage places are visited frequently by a population who "live" religion daily. While taking a walk one can come across tiny sanctuaries with altars containing

¹⁶ Cavadee is a yoke-like milk carrier which devotees use when going to pour out libations to 'Muruga' (a god).

ritual objects, divine images, flowers and candles. These altars are external signs of the cross-breeding of cults. In fact, it is not surprising to see people practising two religions simultaneously. Similarly, it is more interesting to see that some people 'wed' the different religious beliefs, which have given birth to new cults, borrowing from Christianity or other world religions. For example, it is very common to see a Hindu who practices his/her religion praying in a Catholic Church or a Catholic praying in a temple asking the divinities for various favours. When asked why, the obvious answer one gives is that God is the same for all. As a result, the Mauritians have a syncretic tendency of worship to the extent that they find themselves caught up in a situation of dual and even multi-religious consciousness. Cross breeding of religions is a way of finding answers to the human experience of the fear of what is unknown or mysterious. Alongside these syncretic practices, popular belief is considered to be more satisfying and it exists side by side with the official religions. Popular belief is an alternative religion for some people in a certain circumstances, who believe that the official religion cannot duly satisfy their ultimate problems.

2.2 FUNCTIONS OF RELIGION AS A CULTURAL SYSTEM AMONG MAURITIAN CREOLES

In order to come to an understanding of the different religious practices and behaviours of popular religion, we have to understand them within the realm of religion. Religion is one of the universal social and cultural institutions in all human societies since every society practices some form of religion. Sociologists define religion: "as the system of shared beliefs and practices of a society by

which people invoke supernatural forces as explanations of earthly struggles.”¹⁷ These beliefs and practices form the doctrines and rituals of the religion.

Friedrich Schleiermacher defines true religion as a “sense and taste for the Infinite.”¹⁸ The essence of religion is reached in an interior experience that is beyond any dogma, moral code, philosophy, or social system. The intuition of all things within the infinite and Eternal leads to the “feeling of absolute dependence,”¹⁹ which Schleiermacher calls the “*prime characteristic of piety*.” Religion arises from the transcendent and answers the question of the “transcendence” of a human being. Religion is a phenomenon to be found in all societies because it meets universal needs, be they social or psychological. Durkheim’s structural-functionalist analysis began with the assumption that if religion is universal, then it must meet the basic needs of society; it must serve important functions.²⁰ In its psychological aspects, Durkheim argues that religion provides support, consolation, and reconciliation in times of need.

Religion provides emotional support to face the uncertain and often hostile future. Religious beliefs and rituals help people cope with the extraordinary events they experience. In other words, they secure life and give meaning to the problem of death. Where the continuity of life and the succession of generations is of vital importance, as in the African traditional religions, death is

¹⁷ Grunlan, Stephen, & Mayers, Marvin K., Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academic Books, 1988, p. 220.

¹⁸ Schleiermacher, Friedrich, “Christianity and the Religions” In: Viladesau, R., & Massa, M., eds., World Religions: A Sourcebook for Students of Christian Theology, New York: Paulist Press, 1994, p.16.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Durheim, Emile, “The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life”, In: Brinkerhoff, D., & White, I., Sociology, St Paul: West Publishing Co., 1985, p.409.

understood as “the passage to life with the ancestors”²¹. However, among Creoles, the passage to the “other side” is understood as the destruction of the circle of rebirths and as an entry into the Absolute. Religious attitudes and practices, therefore, pattern the life of people during great events of life. In contemporary Christianity, rituals are used to mark such events as births, death, weddings, the resurrection and the birth of Christ.

Human beings exist as historical beings. We exist as both individuals and collective beings in space and time. We form a collective mass, for example, the family, friends and associates. Our existence is shaped by the social, economic, and political events, by institutions and structures, and by the experience of life. That is to say, all of us are born at a certain time, of certain parents, of a certain sex and race, in a certain country and in a given psycho-social milieu. We are conditioned not only by our individuality but also by our cultures and common humanity. As such, the experience of the transcendent may be individual, but it always contains meaning for others in the social group. There is no religion without a community. Ritual, worship, and ethics exist in a community context and have no meaning outside community. Religion becomes real only in the concrete forms of its expression. Religion is apparently a constituent part of being human. Emile Durkheim sees religion as the most important integrating factor in society. It provides a value system by which society can measure itself and punish behaviour that does not conform to the norm. These values are externalised in rituals at the same time as they are internalised as communal events through feasts, myths and participation. This means, however, that religion is a

²¹ Mulemi, Benson, “African Religious Studies”, Lecture Notes on Rites & Rituals, Nairobi: Tangaza College, 1998.

product of society itself. Society needs a “teacher and a disciplinarian and has created them in religion.”²²

The compensation or projection model of the interpretation of religion is ultimately aligned with psychology. In this model, religion is seen as a substitute for unfulfilled wishes, as an escape route from the misery of the world and as a haven where one forgets the storms of life. People project those wishes that are not fulfilled on earth onto heaven. Religion, therefore, has a consoling function as it provides people with meaning in life and the ability to endure.

Seemingly, popular religion which emerges in the Mauritian context, consists of the primary religious experience as opposed to the secondary experience of world religions. The primary religious experience which still has elements of traditional religions, includes the basis of all piety, which is directed to the essence of human life. It is oriented toward the cycle of life and the seasons and is basically defined as the participation of human beings in their world. In the Creole context, popular religion takes the shape of the primary experience of religion, which has existed alongside official or conventional religions and gives meaning to life, or helps people to cope with life crises. It fulfils the unfulfilled quest of our humanity and personhood. Primarily, the “Creole religion” is about belief in fate or luck and about rituals and routines which give meaning to life. Sometimes popular religion may contain aspects of official religion, and vice versa, although official religion may also be hostile towards such popular religion.

²² Sundermeier, Theo, “Religion & Religions” In: Muller, K., Sundermeier, T., Stephen, B., eds., Dictionary of Mission Theology: History, Perspective, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997, p. 392.

Beliefs about black cats, walking under ladders, reading horoscopes, taking mascots and being concerned about Friday 13th are still important to many in today's advanced industrial Mauritian society. It was believed that the advance of enlightenment and rationalism in the nineteenth century would erode 'irrational' beliefs, which would wither away completely as the time and age of science dawned. Although this is still held by many people today, it has not yet happened among the Creoles. The so-called "irrational beliefs" and practices persist even in the most technologically sophisticated industrial societies. In times of distress, for instance, during sickness, the experience of death, bereavement, natural disasters, war and economic depression, the sacred incomprehensible dimension of life is given a new impetus.

2.3 MAJOR LIFE EXPERIENCES AND ASSOCIATED RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AMONG THE CREOLES

Religion serves functions for individuals who believe in it and for society as a whole. Beliefs and rituals are essentially part of any religion. They exhibit the way people think about the universe and their attitude towards life itself. The African religious belief systems, for example, are concerned with God, spirits, human life, magic and the hereafter.

Events nonetheless mark people's lives because these events distinguish the different stages of life. Life-cycle rituals have to do with birth, marriage and death. Life is a celebration in itself. People often think in terms of life-events as matters where 'religion' is very significant. Getting christened, married or being buried in the Church are for many magical means of warding off bad luck and ensuring hope both in this world and the next. These realities of birth, marriage

and death, which have first and foremost religious meaning, form the life of a person. The beliefs held and the rituals performed shape an individual's character and behaviour as well as the community's way of life. Religious feasts, events and illnesses put a mark on the whole way of life.

2.3.1 CHILD BIRTH

During pregnancy a woman makes promises and vows to different saints so that the newly born baby would be normal and healthy at birth. The help of *Notre Dame du Grand Pouvoir*, that is, Our Lady, or the Blessed Father Laval, the Apostle of Mauritius, is the most solicited. When a Mauritian is born, it is very important for the family to protect the new born baby. When I was born, for example, I was told, that my mum made a promise to Father Laval and to Our Lady so that I would have a healthy infancy. That vow was fulfilled by the fact that I received my First Holy Communion bare footed because it was my mother's way of keeping the promise. It was the visible sign or a 'rite' of her promise to these two saints for having kept me healthy and away from any devil's possession or any curse.

Here, there is something which is common among both the Creoles and the Africans. The Mauritian Creoles see their protection in Saints while the Africans see theirs only in the ancestors. The Africans do believe in ancestors who are considered to be the living-dead. They are endowed with special powers. Therefore, they facilitate the birth of children and protect the living family members from attack by malevolent spirits. As those who sanction the moral life of both, individuals and the community, the ancestors punish, exonerate, or reward. Thus, the health of the living depends to "a great extent on their relationships within the extended family and with their

ancestors who mostly communicate their wishes through dreams.”²³

2.3.2 THE FIRST COMMUNION

The First Holy Communion is a great moment in the life of every Catholic. It is the passage from infancy as well as from a pure stage of innocence to a new existential life. Preparing for the first communion is very important for the Creole children. To prepare themselves, they attend a retreat of two days. On the second day, they are required to confess. In fact, the retreat ends with the sacrament of reconciliation. “On the eve of the ceremony, after the sacrament of reconciliation, the child cannot go out from the house, because he or she is perceived to be pure.”²⁴

The first communion is a way of fulfilling promises made by parents during the birth of their children. Most of the times, the new-born baby is consecrated to Our Lady or a saint. This consecration aims at assuring future protection to the child. Special rites accompanied with prayers would be performed and said. The ultimate objective here is to maintain and to prolong life at all costs. Such manifestation of popular piety is understood as magico-religious practices blended with devotions typical of the faith of the Creole milieu.

2.3.3 ILLNESS

Health is always a major concern to each and every one. It is regarded as a “set of positive attributes not just the absence of illness.”²⁵ The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health

²³ Pobee, John S., Toward an African Theology, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979, p. 46-47.

²⁴ Diocese of Port Louis, Mauritius, “Mo Pas Croire dans ça banne Zaffaires là, Mais le Mal Existe” In: A Research among the Creoles about Popular Religion, Port-Louis: 1995, p. 14.

²⁵ Pruyser, P., W., “Health & Illness” In: Hunter, Rodney J., eds., Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counselling, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990, p. 501.

as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”²⁶ There is no human being in this world who has not faced the reality of illness. Those who are sick in most cases always question the meaning of their lives. The anxiety of death, however, raises questions about life and illness and, as such, it prompts this question about life and death. Although modern medicine can cure certain diseases, it may not give an adequate explanation about the causes of illnesses. For instance, my sister experienced a long duration of illness when she was in secondary school. She fell severely sick when she was at school and was sent back home. After a long period of illness, the doctor concluded that she was severely depressed because of her studies and the college environment.

However, in our view, the medical report we received about the illness of my sister was not convincing, because she was sick for a very long period of time. There was something mysterious about this. One of my relatives who came to visit her believed that there was something unnatural and it was only a ‘particular person’ who would be able to restore the health of my sister. It was believed that neither the explanation of the doctor nor the medicine prescribed would give a fully satisfying answer to that kind of sickness.

In fact, factors, such as bad diet, hereditary stress, anger, hostility, rivalry, anxiety, fear, fatigue, ambivalence, and identity crisis, can lead to illness. Such factors, however, are almost always

²⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 8, p.68, quoted in: Igenoza, A. O., “Medicine and Healing in African Christianity: A Biblical Critique”, AFER, 41 (2&3), 1999, p. 147.

perceived as having “a precipitating function in individuals whose vulnerability has been exploited by the possessive power of malevolent forces.”²⁷

In this sense, and especially in the Creole mind, an illness is not only caused by an organic or a biological lapse but it is also caused by some kind of malicious and evil forces. This is an internalised belief that an illness is never understood as natural and, therefore, the illness needs special ‘treatments’. Such treatments are done with explicit reference to obscure negative forces. Those negative forces have to be neutralised so that the person would be ‘cured’ or ‘healed’. Blessed Father Laval as such, is one among others who are seen to have the ability to heal people.

Similarly, in the context of traditional African religious belief, the following basic question is being raised: “Who is the cause of my illness? Is it I, or is it someone else?” In this context, organically manifested symptoms are always perceived to the result of some personalistic aggressions and are thus not just physically induced. What is essentially sought in every illness, either somatic or emotional, is the significance of such dis-ease.

2.3.4. DEATH

According to Heidegger’s philosophy, “Man who is a being-in-the-world, is a being-for-death.”²⁸ The whole life is the process or movement toward death. Death is for all and life is a biological process definitely susceptible to total destruction or nothingness. We have to face this distinction

²⁷ Mpolo, M. Ma., cited P’ Bitek O., and Dawson J., “Traditional African Religious Studies” In: Hunter, Rodney J., eds., Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counselling, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990, p. 13-14.

whoever we are. Everyone has to undergo this reality. When we look at life deeply, there is in our consciousness a desire to live for ever; a longing to carry on for ever, although experience is there to prove that death is a final inevitable and an irreversible event. So, to exist is to go towards death, to the complete failure of one's life within the world. To the African, however, death is just a disappearance, or a mere departure. This understanding shows that to the Africans, death is not a complete destruction of the individual.

Death is frightening and it is believed among the Creoles that it can be caused by supernatural beings, such as bad spirits. Recourse to popular religion is, therefore, very common as a way of getting out of this dilemma and doing away with the spirits of the dead who might come to disturb the living. Africans, too, do believe that "every time a person dies, this death is 'caused' "²⁹. It is a common belief among Creoles that the dead person's 'soul' is not fully departed until 40 days are over, which reflects a syncretic popular belief rooted in the Christian Scriptures. Human beings want to live forever; they, therefore, ignore death, as though they do not have to die. This is because they do not have the courage to live with death, which is certain. The denial of the reality of death is based on the popular perception that human life does not have any meaning, if it is meant to completely disappear at death.

²⁸ Chalissery, Georges, "Death", Lecture Notes on Eschatology, Nairobi: Jangaza College, 1999.

²⁹ Mbiti, John S., Introduction to African Religion, Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1994, p. 117.

2.3.5 FUNERAL RITUALS AMONG THE CREOLES: THE CASE OF MY FATHER'S DEATH.

Rituals and ceremonies associated with death are important in the Creole culture. People are very sensitive to what is done when there is a death in the family. Care is taken to fulfil the funeral rites, and to avoid causing any offence against the departed.

My father, for example, died in hospital after a long period of illness. He was brought to the family house and the body was washed by my elder brothers. I witnessed this scene for I brought his clothes. He was dressed in his best suit. After that he was placed on the death-bed. A small table was placed beside the death-bed at the head level on which there was the blessed water, flowers and a lighted candle. A rosary was placed in his crossed hands. Neighbours, relatives and other people came to pay their last respects to my late father before burial. Prayers, drinking rum, tea and coffee, playing cards or lotto and telling stories sustained the traditional vigil night. The burial took place the following day.

However, before going to church for the funeral, the body was placed in the coffin and prayers were said. The two candles which were burnt first during the vigil night were put in the coffin. They were to give light to the dead on his way to the destination of all the dead. After this, grand children jumped over the coffin from right to left. This ritual is to signify the grandchildren's detachment from their departed grandfather.

In the cemetery, we had prayed again and a handful of soil was thrown on the coffin by relatives and friends before the body was buried. Before going back home, we had to perform some kind of

ritual. We washed our hands well and the soil sticking to our shoes was cleaned at a well next to the gate of the cemetery. We also poured some water on our heads. When we arrived home, we had to go first to the bathroom to purify ourselves. We had to bath and change clothes. As for men, they stopped at a bar to consume alcoholic drinks as part of the purification ritual.

These rituals are usually performed because the cemetery is considered as a place for the dead but who are not fully dead, for their 'souls' are perceived to be still alive.³⁰ It is believed that the dead continue having some influence on their living relatives. In this case, the dead, according to the Creoles, are not considered as ancestors as is the case for the Africans. They are not 'the living dead' who occupy an ontological position between spirits and man. They are not instruments through which human beings can reach God. Rituals given to the dead include prayers, watering the tomb, putting flowers or pouring an alcoholic beverage (rum) on the tomb, if that person used to drink it. People do bring food and cigarettes to the dead too. The principal Cross, which is found in the main alley, is the witness of all kinds of rituals. It is a place where at a certain time of the day, mainly mid-day or mid-night, a particular person can talk or ask for something from the "chief of the spirits" of the cemetery. This particular 'being' is a spirit who is perceived to be powerful and is opposed to God. Sometimes this 'being' is seen as Lucifer or as a being who can either harm or do good to the living.

The day following the burial of my father, at dusk, my family, together with some relatives and neighbours, gathered where the death-bed was for prayer. This prayer session was held every night until the eighth day. A candle would also be lit every night on the small table which was placed

³⁰ The 'soul' of the dead is seen as an entity which can harm the living. The 'soul' is associated with the evil spirit.

beside the death bed during the traditional vigil night. The interpretation of this ritual, is that during these eight days, the deceased's soul is perceived to be still hovering around between earth and heaven. Its admission to heaven would depend on the intensity of prayers and the different rituals performed. Failure to accomplish this, would imply that a dead person's soul would become "ène mauvais n'âmes", that is, a bad spirit and would continue to hover restlessly on the earth and haunt the living. Prayers are said during the eight days and a mass concludes the prayer sessions the following morning for the final rest of the soul of the dead.

2.3.6 THE LAST FUNERAL PRAYER RITUAL

During those eight days of my father's funeral, the nights were like the vigil night. People came for prayers or to tell stories or to play cards and lotto while rum, tea and coffee were served. The last prayer during the eighth night had to end at midnight whereby the candles which were used during all these days of mourning were removed; the small table was also removed and put outside the house. As a result, it was believed that the soul of our late father was no more in the house. After the final prayer among the Creoles, some would mourn for forty days, some for one or two years. People would dress in black and white or pink colours depending on how intimate one was with the departed. All these rituals from the vigil night to the eighth day following the funeral have to be performed so that the dead would have a definitive departure and a peaceful rest. These rituals are indispensable because it is a way of negotiation with the dead who is perceived as a menace to the living. The living have to do whatever is possible to facilitate the peaceful 'departure' of the dead.

2.3.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RITUAL PRACTICES IN MAURITIAN-CREOLE RELIGIOSITY

Religion is something which is part of the fabric of society and life is something celebrated and lived. Religion is expressed mainly through belief, custom and practice. These elements which surround the life circle have its significance in popular religiosity among the Creoles. Ritual as an operative quasi-magical force co-exists and is interwoven with religious practices. These practices are widely used for a variety of purposes. For example, they contain many magico-religious prescriptions provided to deal with ill health, barrenness, lack of love between men and women, the 'evil eye', witches, spells against people, difficult childbirth and unsuccessful business. Two main types of practices significant to Mauritian Creole religiosity flow from any ritual, that is, '*preventive*' and '*curative*' practices.

Promises and vows are very common in these types of practices for obtaining graces. For example, in case of prolonged illness, a person promises to go on a pilgrimage, to sacrifice an animal annually or to give something to a divinity. The practice of making vows on the other hand is in most cases observed during child-birth or a wedding ceremony. Parents very often promise to shave the child till his/her first Holy Communion. Most of the children are consecrated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. This practice is to protect children from sickness. The first communion marks an important step, and time to accomplish the vow. Protective amulets against misfortune, particularly against miscarriages, are part of the very reality of the world people inhabit. Having a miraculous medal, keeping blessed water in the house for purification, burning candles on a certain

day, placing offerings in spirit shrines associated with a particular family, sprinkling incense on a pan of embers and carrying it through all the rooms at sunset on Fridays are other preventive practices.

Despite of all the preventive measures taken at the popular level, people are often more concerned with the identification of sources of evil which would counter their success or fulfilment. Curative measures, then, are to assure them of success. Among these practices, there is the quest for blessings, particularly the blessing of the house and compound which is to make it an indwelling place for God. A 'guardian spirit' is placed in the compound to contest any harmful evil spirit which is believed to be looking for the souls of children.

As seen above, beliefs, rituals and their practices centre around uncertainties associated with birth, death, success, failure, and crises. They become part of the world view of the people constructed by the society as a pattern for the human condition and the recurrent problems experienced.

2.4 RITUAL EXPRESSION AND CONTROL

Emile Durkheim argues that religious phenomena fall into two basic categories: beliefs and rites. Ritual is a symbolic expression of belief, that is, particular modes of action. It involves all patterns of behaviour ranging from activities like greetings, curing illnesses, rituals for the increase of fertility, defeating enemies, changing people's social status, removing impurity, and foretelling the future. Ritual also involves any ceremonious performance. However, some rituals are done without

the idea of supernatural or occult power and therefore, there may be secular or religious rituals. Drawing from Victor Turner's definition: "a ritual is a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words and objects in a sequestered place and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actor's goals and interests."³¹

I have always been deeply curious to know the innumerable little things that one is compelled to do in one's own life. When I grew to an age at which I could understand things around me, like any other children of my age, I was 'open-mouthed' when my mother performed some kind of rituals, sometimes 'religiously'. By that time, we did not have any hint of what was going on though we had a vague idea of the whole procedure. Sometimes we would question our mother or grand mother who would just give a vague answer, or try to escape from the insisting inquiry of children; because it was a sacred world in which children are not allowed to enter.

Daily life experience is filled with patterned activities. It is coloured with all sorts of rituals, which are symbolic rather than real. Rituals are somehow socially sanctioned. For example, Tuesday, Wednesday and Sunday are ill-fated days among Mauritian Creoles. Similarly, cutting nails on Tuesday or Wednesday is strictly forbidden. If a person happens to cut his/her nails on Wednesdays, he or she would be 'corrected' by somebody else. Rituals, therefore, have their importance in life, be they the occasion of sacred or profane events. They tell us something more than what is being performed externally.

³¹ Mulemi, Benson, "African Religious Studies", Lecture Notes on Rites & Rituals, Tangaza College, 1998.

Ritual behaviour is a way of communicating with the divine for the purpose of changing the human situation. It is a universal phenomenon which is also found in Mauritius and the rest of Africa. Basically, it is concerned about putting the person in contact with God or his representatives. As such its twofold dimension is very essential, that is, what the person is saying and doing. The words that accompany the ritual symbols, say some things about the nature of what is being done. The two entities of 'how and why' point out for example, on how and why people communicate with the gods, expel illnesses, settle moral conflicts, direct sacred power, form children into adults, control and renew the flow of time. The dimensions of 'saying' and 'doing' are thus closely related. "What is 'said' in symbolic terms is what is 'done' in ritual terms to modify experience in accordance with what men desire."³²

2.5 THE RECOURSE -SEEKING BEHAVIOUR AMONG LAY MAURITIAN CREOLES

The Danish Lutheran Soren Kierkegaard argued that our individuality is bound up with the awareness of our limitations and especially, our awareness of impending death. Therefore, it is our relationship with the Absolute that finally counts, not our relationships with one another. Sickness unto death and dread are characteristic of existential man. It is death that sets the framework of human existence. If there is no thought of death and if the future is regarded as stretching out indefinitely, then there is no great sense of urgency or responsibility. In the inauthentic mode of existence, death is covered up through euphemisms and the impersonal treatment of the whole

³² Ray, Benjamin C., African Religions: Symbol Ritual, and Community, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976, p. 78.

matter. We acknowledge that everyone must die, but we somehow manage to put our own death off into the indefinite future.

Generally, when we feel threatened by any evil power, we seek to perform some ritual as a way of seeking help or recourse. To be efficient these rituals should be perceived to be in a close physical proximity with the sacred and to have the possibility to capture the salvific energy. Isambert wrote that, "A rite is performed when it realises on a conventional mode a certain relation to others (person, object or divinity) by the symbol which in itself called a relation."³³ By this, the rite as a symbolic action is not like an action focusing on a person or the world and aiming to transform them by some vital forces belonging to nature.

Rites as mentioned above are aimed at transforming the existence of humankind and fostering a link between God and human beings. Rites, here, give assurance to realities such as, the body, the family, the environment, etc., which have been stained by the evil power. Similarly, bad luck is thought to have been touched by the power of the sacred through rite. In most cases, the aim behind a rite in the popular milieu is to counteract the action of the evil forces or bad luck and to re-establish the order to its status of normality and harmony.

The different rites or rituals become real only in the concrete forms of popular religion which give it its visible expression. Rituals, symbols and words are these expressions which have no validity outside popular religion. What makes some people in the Creole milieu resort to popular religion

³³ Isambert, F., *Rite et Efficacité Symbolique*, Paris: Cerf, 1979, p. 99.

as their main recourse? Popular religion is seen as a need for certain people in the Creole socio-cultural context, who believe with a certain modesty that the official religion, that is, Catholicism, cannot duly address their ultimate problems. Popular religion is a 'religion of recourse' especially when people become aware of their vulnerability and their limitedness.

People feel that their lives are being threatened by diseases, bad luck and death mainly because life is fragile. Life is rendered fragile or threatened due to biological failure and a network of visible and invisible hostile forces. Therefore, popular religion is perceived to be a means of recourse for people to protect themselves. They seek solutions or answers to their quests in popular religion vis-à-vis of an "official" religion which seems unable to respond to their immediate needs. Once human beings become aware of the fact that life is vulnerable, they become radically anxious. It is a real and deeply-rooted feeling of radical anxiety which makes us strive to overcome our human limitedness by creating fulfilment for ourselves in different ways. Human beings do everything that is possible to restore hope. Religious piety as a defence mechanism and escapism provides this so-called 'hope'. An examination of the religious behavioural pattern and attitudes of the people tells us something profound about the ones who seek help or solace from popular religiosity. Everyone in either popular or official religious contexts aspires to be happy and successful in life. People feel that happiness or success in life does not depend on them and thus condition life in its very essence to dependence.

In the Creole context, those who are faced with a misfortune first resort to cursing the neighbourhood, the “mauvais oeil” or “mauvais zair”³⁴. Evil or evil spirits exist and only a small group of people doubt their existence. The image of evil is portrayed in different ways, for instance evil is described as demon, Satan, the devil or the ‘wrongly-dead’, that is, those who are believed to die in an unnatural way and haunt people in their dreams. Bad dreams are perceived as signs which manifest the presence of these harmful characters. All these produce uneasy feeling or dis-ease and anxiety. In such circumstances happiness becomes elusive because people are constantly threatened. Therefore, the Creoles resort to different entities or agents which they perceive to be the most efficient sources of help at different times.

2.5.1 RESORT TO “THE PROTECTORS”

To be protected and find happiness and success in life, we need to resort to a recourse to protect ourselves. There are a lot of ‘protectors’, such as, religious men or witch-doctors, who are ready to ‘help’, depending on the type of the threat. It may happen that a person can consult five or more protectors successively after a short lapse of time, depending on the effect of their action, or the result of the therapy obtained.

Furthermore, in a search for recourse to fight the evil forces, the Creoles consult the ‘longaniste’ or ‘traiteur’ or ‘docteur sans souliers’³⁵. This “specialist” is likely to reveal where the evil is. He possesses paraphernalia of cultic objects to assure one’s protection. But he can also respond to the

³⁴ “Mauvais oeil” or “mauvais zair” = evil eye is translated as the Evil one.

³⁵ They are likely to be identified as witch doctors, sorcerers, diviners or traditional healers.

desire of attacking those who are obstacles to one's happiness. In this sense, we can call them sorcerers. The 'Pousari' (an Indian priest), officiating in a temple, is also frequently consulted but other persons who are more or less religious, play a similar role.

2.5.2 RESORT TO RELIGIOUS PEOPLE

To consult the priest, the pastor, the swami, the pundit and the imam is something very common. They are seen as representatives of God or the mediators. The priest is a good point of reference, for he is seen as having a mysterious power not only because of his sacerdotal function, but also he is seen as a "learned person". The priest's celibate state intrigues many lay Creoles. In some cases, this quality increases his prestige, while in other cases, his celibacy raises questions. He is sometimes considered to be holding some secrets.

Religious men and women are respected too, because they are consecrated. Other non-consecrated Christians have certain abilities. Though more or less outside of the official Church, they draw to themselves a considerable number of people because of their prayer and healing powers. These two different groups of people above are the ones who deal with evil forces and are widely consulted by people.

2.5.3 RESORT TO SAINTS

It is a widespread view that the saints also play an important role in this process of recourse-seeking. They are solicited for protection and are considered as special persons or other beings whose powers emanate from God. The saints are perceived as being in the eternal presence of God

and close to the angels, and hence, their pictures or statues are believed to have an equivalent protective effect found in objects such as the cross. Some saints are believed to have particular power to heal unexplained illnesses. Other saints act as judges in cases where somebody who needs a saint to intervene on his/her behalf. Saints as avengers, judges or intermediaries are the main helpers within the popular religion. On Fridays for example, incense is burned in the houses before praying to the saints. The Mauritian Creoles believe that a particular saint hears their prayers so that he may help people in their distress. Frequent prayers and invocations to saints are made for protection of the families during time of special need as well as soliciting their help or their graces. Praying may be accompanied by sacrifices, libation or offerings or magic spells. In this sense, a person can, therefore, increase his/her power in the world and have control over supernatural realities. This explains the practice of divination and the cult of saints and the resort to supernatural forces in all spheres of life, including consultations for success in exams, for a promotion, to succeed in life and to have a good marriage partner. Not only the Catholic saints are asked to intervene during times of need but also, in certain circumstances, ancestors and saints of other religions are consulted. In some cases, saints of other religions are believed to be more powerful and efficient than the Catholic saints

The person encountered in the context of popular religion is first obsessed with his existential fragility and fear of a hostile universe; that is, he or she is a person in distress. Surrounded by malevolent forces and bad spirits, one has to protect himself or herself. One is able to exercise a certain amount of control over the invisible world and the forces of nature. At all costs, it is essential and of fundamental importance for a person to normalise and harmonise one's life by

using all the resources available. In this case, therefore, lay Mauritian Creoles move freely between the popular syncretic religious practices and the official religions; Christian and non-Christian.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CHALLENGE OF POPULAR RELIGION TO THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AMONG THE CREOLES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The basic question of humanity revolves around the two fundamental closely linked issues of meaning and existence. Life, which is constantly threatened to sink into nothingness, manifests itself as fragile. Most of us are apprehensive about the experience of dying. The fear of death is a paralysing fear to modern people, who lack a sure knowledge of God. It is only believed that resorting to different recourses can break the hopelessness of existence. The recourses overcome ultimate fear and preserve one from being attacked by malevolent spirits or from the curse of others.

3.2 THE NEED FOR HOPE AND REASSURANCE IN LIFE

There is no doubt that everybody thirsts for a good and successful life. However, the daily experience tends to contradict this need for happiness. Here, life is at stake! Beyond all doubt, suffering and death are inevitable realities. Therefore, this dual element of life and death in the subconsciousness of people automatically shapes their lives. As a result, anxiety and fear of death revolve around what the Mauritian call *'le mal existe'*³⁶. Anxiety, bad luck, misfortune, illness or possession by the 'devil' are seen to be potential threats to life. Consequently, people, feel that there is a need to protect themselves against any negative element. Apparently, cursing, bad luck

³⁶ Evil spirit does exist.

and suffering seem to be pending heavily over them as if they would be struck, at any time, triggered off -like the sword of Damocles -by the spirit of the devil. People are threatened in different ways and move around in fear of their lives. Francis Bacon sums up this deeply-rooted feeling of humanity, "man, conscious of his finite reality, fears death."³⁷ The threat of death is omnipresent. The human person becomes vulnerable. People live in a situation of fear and anxiety where they find themselves threatened by curses or evil obsession, sickness or diseases, suffering and finally death. In a way, such persons find themselves socially and psychologically oppressed. They start to question the meaning of life and of their existence in this world. Seemingly, the whole aspect of life is seen as hostile filled with ominous occurrences. It is a characteristic of those who find themselves in this uncertain world. It paves the way to a negative experience of life, which in turn creates a real existential anxiety, that is, to live in constant pessimism and fear of dying. The realities of life cause distress to most people in contemporary Mauritius.

Paul Tillich, a German Lutheran existentialist theologian stresses the fact that the anxiety of modern people is not something neurotic or pathological, but something that is intrinsic to the human condition. A person whose life is meaningless or who is always subjected to guilt and consciousness, whether from specific actions or as a vague, general backdrop, is a source of anxiety and frailty. Finally, there is the underlying fear of death, which poses the greatest concrete threat to all human beings.

³⁷ Chalissery, Georges, "Death", Lecture Notes on Eschatology, Nairobi: Tangaza College, 1999.

The very fact that death is inevitable and the human condition is contingent, causes anxiety to people who do not want to face and accept the reality whereby the future is perceived as uncertain. The impending threat of death, thus totally present at every moment, begets a world-wide psychosis. Faced with this nightmarish stumbling block of death, many take refuge in forgetfulness, many seek diversion of mind, and suppress their feelings. Anxiety arises when we recognise our existential limitedness and a life infinitely better than this one.

Obviously, each and everyone who lives in this world wishes to have a long and peaceful life without any problem. We long for happiness, for a successful life and for eternal life. The quest for happiness and success is not a mere utopia for people; happiness and success do take place in the life experience of people by means of a long life which everyone strives. To achieve this we do whatever we can according to our abilities and possibilities. Popular religion finds its *raison d'être* in such an existential anguish.

People do resort to both popular and official religion when faced with problems or questions which are beyond their control or when they are confronted by that which is incomprehensible. However, those negative elements mentioned above which seem to be threats to life are grounds of action for one to turn either to popular or official religion. People resort to popular religion, when faced with a problem whose nature is totally vague, somehow mysterious and very often confusing. For example, if a person is sick and the medical doctor cannot find the cause of, or cannot even diagnose the disease, then most likely this case will end by finding a solution in popular belief. On the other hand, people adhere to official religion when faced with the normal

realities of life, for example, disease, poverty, deaths, as long as the causes can be explained logically and rationally, even though they may be beyond human control. If, for example, one suffers from HIV/AIDS, they will adhere to official religion and its related official sector of health care. However, if one suffers from unidentified sickness, one would quickly take refuge in popular religion and its related health practices. This suggests that the religious values of popular religion, its practices and its beliefs in this case, can come to a meeting with Christian faith. For, these practices and beliefs are constitutive to some of the basic tenets of the faith. Blended with religious acts proper, for example, prayer, repentance and conversion, these beliefs and practices play a prominent unifying role in symbolism and in expressing the sacred.

3.3 PASTORAL-THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

A reason for a pastoral-theological appreciation of popular religion can be found in its deep piety; its profound sense of the holy and transcendent; its ability to pray and make sacrifices, suffer, and heal; its willingness to put up with hopeless situations; its readiness for friendship, love, and family solidarity. It is necessary to bring these values of popular religion into a genuine and honest dialogue with the demands of the official Christian proclamation.

Popular religion, if it purifies itself of its dubious and excessive elements of piety, has a greater awareness of God himself; his providence and his loving and constant care and presence. It then, fosters interior virtues such as patience, the sensitivity for an openness to the cross in daily life, detachment from “worldly” things and openness to others. The different expressions of popular religion of the Creole community can offer forms of expression of faith or religious hope. They

may be charged with great religious sincerity and human authenticity in their expression of believing trust as well as the objective content of faith.

3.4 WHAT OUGHT TO BE THE RESPONSE OF THE CHURCH

The Mauritian believes that God is the one who sees everything, hears everything and is everywhere. He is the living origin and sustenance of all things. In John Mbiti's work, *Concept of God in Africa (1969)*, he draws the conclusion that at least this traditional concept is shared almost by all the Africans in all societies without a single exception. This is the minimal and fundamental idea about God expressed in popular religion among the Mauritian Creoles. They conceive God as the God and the Father of everybody. He is a God of love who can judge and punish people sometimes. This image is in fact the most appropriate to comprehend God. However, God is not seen as Trinity. Jesus is not the unique mediator between God and man, and the Holy Spirit appears as the most powerful of other spirits and is not seen as the third divine person of the Trinity.

God, in popular religion, is conceptualised as "an old bearded man and a judge with an eye, a hand, an ear and a scale." Finally, no one can escape from the wrath of this judge. It is surprising to note that the figure of God the Father recedes into the background. It is possible to make God mercifully disposed with the help of the saints, who perform a mediating function between God and mankind. Jesus is the unique mediator and Son of God, who in his earthly life, worked miracles, healed the sick, expelled the evil powers, and raised the dead. The Creoles expect similar

manifestations of God's power because for them, everything is in the hands of God.

Resurrection in this world and having life to the full with Jesus as liberator for a new and creative humanness is unknown to popular religion. There is hardly any consciousness of the new life in the Holy Spirit who is responsible for the progress of this world and who should bear witness to the saving event of our redemption.

The fundamental role of the Church, therefore, is to bring forth to the people a type of spirituality that would respond to their immediate needs, to help them to grow in their faith, so that they can willingly and joyfully come together to celebrate the wonderful deeds of God. In brief, the Church has to liberate. She has to bring forth Jesus Christ, who is the liberator, to the midst of the people; she should embark on a proclamation of "*proximity*" which reaches the people in their own situation and would challenge their faith. To be effective in bringing Jesus into the life of people, it is imperative that the agents of the Gospel understand the behaviour and motivation of those without formal theological education or social mobility. Still, the popular forms of religiousness must not necessarily be subjected to negative judgement: they sometimes constitute splendid manifestations of an inculturation of faith.

Popular religion in its positive aspect can bring people to an experience of the divine. Pope Paul VI stresses that "...real religious attitudes which overcome the risks of deviation and if well oriented, they can be for people, a real encounter with God in Jesus Christ."³⁸

³⁸ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelisation in the Modern World. Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1976, n. 48 (8 Dec. 1975).

The Council of Vatican II, has a good number of documents that illustrate the life of the Church. It says: "Popular devotions of the Christian people, provided they conform to the laws and norms of the Church, are to be highly recommended."³⁹

The fundamental intention is that the Church has to foster a renewal in liturgical and sacramental life that corresponds to what the people, namely the popular masses, want to live and celebrate. She, therefore, has to dialogue with the popular religion. If a true ecclesial liturgy, being a genuinely popular one where each and every one finds himself at home, would be celebrated, then the Church could say that she has succeeded in integrating popular piety into her teaching. The Council of Vatican II brings about a consciousness and deliberate attempt to change, by enriching the style and content of various practices.

³⁹ Flannery, Austin, ed., Vatican II Document: *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 13 (4 Dec. 1963), Bombay: St Paul Publications, 1992, p.26.

CONCLUSION

The human being is fundamentally religious. One cannot disregard the fact that he or she is pious in one way or another. Each one of us has his or her way of experiencing the transcendent. Such experiences take so many varied and infinite forms that they cannot be reduced to one common denominator. In most religions for example, the entry of God into the life of a group or an individual is formative to that group or individual. So is popular religion. This experience takes a central significance and defines a person's relationship to the world and to himself or herself. Ultimately there is a difference only in the degree in which the experience of God is conceived more in relation to human beings and their bodies as in the African traditional religions, in relation to nature as in Indian religions, or to the cosmos as in Chinese religions and so on.

What is important as far as popular religion is concerned is to re-focus this same piety towards the revelation of God which was brought by Jesus Christ himself. Once popular religion has been re-formed to this extent, a true and genuine relationship with Christ would follow, and there is a need to allow each person to follow Christ's teaching in his Church.

Christ and the Church, then, become necessarily a meaningful message for the human person. The Word of God, became incarnate, that is, in became man ("flesh"), and in becoming man, assumed human nature in everything, except sin. In this way, Jesus Christ, who is "the image of the invisible God," (Col 1:15) is also the perfect man. From this, it follows that "in reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Flannery, Austin, ed., Vatican II Document: *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22 (7 Dec. 1965), Bombay: St Paul Publications, 1992, p. 811.

The Church therefore, in presenting the Christian message, not only shows who God is and what his saving plan is, but, as Jesus himself did, she reveals person to person and makes one more aware of his sublime vocation. Jesus should be meaningful and relevant to the life of any one who actually searches for an answer to the questions that concern the origin and destiny of humankind and the reasons for suffering, death, and evil. The pastoral approach to such thirst for life in Christ has to be deeply rooted in and to come from communion with Jesus himself. It should be moulded according to the human experience of, and the interaction between, Jesus and his disciples.

The Church should be “concerned with making men attentive to their more significant experiences, both personal and social; it also has the duty of placing under the light of the Gospel, the questions which arise from those experiences so that there may be stimulated within men a right desire to transform their ways of life.”⁴¹ This implies that, to live in communion with Christ is to experience the new life of grace.

“ To all who received him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:12). Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and the new life of the Spirit that he gave to all who come to him, he has transformed our existence. Therefore, the Christian has hope, which breaks the hopelessness of existence. In Jesus, life may be lived at its highest and fullest. This life is God-given and the life that Jesus gives through a relationship with him is eternal life; a relationship and a way of life, that reaches beyond the death of the body.

⁴¹ Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, General Catechetical Directory, *Ad normam decreti* (11 April 1971).

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