

Subversive compliance? The concept of popular religion in recent cultural studies and beyond

Maike Neufend

Abstract:

The editors Judith Schlehe and Evamaria Sandkühler set out to investigate popular religion as a useful conceptual term. The objective is to grasp deinstitutionalized religious lifestyles and ideas as well as reconstructions and reinventions of traditions within local situations and along historical developments in transcultural perspective. In this way, conditions of specific power relationships, discourses, and practices on the ground as well as transnational interconnectedness and global exchange processes are examined. A more comprehensive analysis is achieved through three articles introducing the reader to the topic on a historical-conceptual level. The remaining eight articles are divided by geographical allocation to Southeast Asia and Europe. Rich in empirical material as well as theory-led debate, this volume is interesting for everyone concerned with religion and/or popular culture across disciplines.

How to cite:

Neufend, Maike: „Subversive compliance? The concept of popular religion in recent cultural studies and beyond [Review on: Schlehe, Judith and Evamaria Sandkühler (Hg.): Religion, Tradition and the Popular: Transcultural Views from Asia and Europe (History in Popular Cultures, vol. 12). Bielefeld: transcript, 2014.]“. In: KULT_online 40 (2014).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2014.866>

© by the authors and by KULT_online

Subversive compliance? The concept of popular religion in recent cultural studies and beyond

Maike Neufend

Schlehe, Judith and Evamaria Sandkühler (Hg.): Religion, Tradition and the Popular: Transcultural Views from Asia and Europe (History in Popular Cultures, vol. 12). Bielefeld: transcript, 2014. 286 Seiten, kart., mit farb. Abb. 35,88 Euro. ISBN 978-3-8376-2613-1

This volume is mainly based on the international conference entitled "Religion, Tradition and the Popular in Asia and Europe" held at University of Freiburg in 2012. In the introduction the editors provide a portrayal of discourses around the three title terms Religion, Tradition and the Popular. Schlehe and Sandkühler draw on common critical approaches to feature an inclusive view on religion and its relation to tradition. Starting out with Talal Asad's deconstruction of the very term religion by rejecting any universal definition, the editors pursue "new ways of conceptualising popular religion as cultural process connected to contemporary values and relations of power" (9). Thus, this volume's approach to religion is located at the heart of Cultural Studies. This is further elaborated through a "decentring" of religion, firstly, from any supposed western origin and secondly, from a concentration on institutionalized religions and their affiliated sects and movements.

In this way the book sets forth an appealing approach to analyse "many figurations of spiritual experiences, beliefs and practices" (p. 10) without defining religion exclusively either as concept or practice. What is ascribed to all religious movements and communities are reconstructions of tradition, which "do not simply represent instrumentalisation, but also offer an opportunity for self-determination and regained self-esteem" (p. 13). Following Brosius and Polit, reinventions of traditions can foster counter-hegemonic discourses as much as add profit to local and global players – tradition then becomes economically relevant.

The same holds true for the "popular". This notion is deployed by the editors to overcome divisions between so-called established religions, local cosmologies, and ritual practices. Although the editors emphasize that every author uses different notions of the popular, they propose in general to focus on popular religion and popularized religion beyond national or cultural boundaries. Such perspective allows a look at individual agency and emotional or spiritual experience or entertainment as well as commodification, marketability, and connections to neo-liberal forces (p. 7).

The conceptual part of the book covers three disciplinary approaches from sociology and history to cultural anthropology. And all authors agree: popular religion is a rather complex term

with ideological overtones. Peter J. Bräunlein and Anthony Reid, both scholars of Southeast Asia, explore in length how "the popular" depends on the field of study and disciplinary tools used. Bräunlein shows how Philippine "popular Christianity" lost its self-explanatory and simplifying quality in post-colonial discourses (104). Anthony Reid elaborates on terms "cosmopolis" and "vernacularisation" to expose how "popular religion" as pattern was created in 19th century Southeast Asia. Hubert Knoblauch's conceptual contribution, "The Communicative Construction of Transcendence: A New Approach to Popular Religion," is in my opinion particularly interesting in this discussion because he defines popular religion by distinguishing it from prior forms of popularity: either referring to folk as "popular class" or referring to mass media communication or industrial mass production in a modern sense (41).

What is intriguing about Knoblauch's attempt is that he introduces the concept of popular religion as an "analytical tool" (30) able to describe religious transformations embedded in broader social theory. As a student of Thomas Luckmann he refers to phenomenology and constructionism to argue that transcendence is constructed via communication: transcendence "is dependent on a relation to an other, it depends on the possibility to experience alter ego in a bodily, sensual way which is, simultaneously, accessible to the bodily senses" (35). Although he applies Habermas' notion here, he opposes the belief that communication and meaning is linked to language. In fact, non-linguistic bodily communication already imply meaning. Furthermore, he dismisses the idea that we need to relate to a human being to experience alter ego in a bodily, sensual way: stones can be rather successful communication partners in some religions (35). Communicative construction of transcendence is used by Knoblauch as a basic theoretical frame which incorporates spirituality as well as other forms of transcending, i.e. the subject experiences itself in surpassing itself. Orientation toward the triadic relation of subject, other, and objectivation emerging from communicative action is considered by Knoblauch – as well as Durkheim – as "great transcendence" or, in other words, "religion". But, according to Knoblauch, what we perceive as religious changes dynamically. Due to the fact that religious knowledge is now universally accessible, "the boundary between 'religious' and 'non-religious' people, so important to sociological analysis of 'secularisation', is transgressed" (43). To sum up, Knoblauch's definition of popular religion refers to a non-substantialist understanding of religion. He describes a broad phenomenon based on social de-structuring of knowledge. Popular religion could thus be considered as more secular and more religious at the same time. This attempt seems attractive to help us extend our analytical perspective beyond concepts of "the secular" and "the religious".

The variety of this volume is made visible by the interdisciplinary perspectives on cultural processes offered from the collection of papers. They range from media studies, sociology, cultural studies, and anthropology to history, sinology, and Scandinavian studies. By giving attention to popular(-ized) religions in global and local connections, this volume seeks to stress transnational dimensions through a "relational approach" (8) more fully; at the same time it "de-exoticizes" (186) religious phenomena. If popular religion in the end is read as subversive in terms of opposing fundamentalism and/or conformist in terms of embracing neo-liberalism, this depends on its respective historical and social situation. However, that there's an urgent

need to again and again conceptualize such complex term as popular within cultural studies based on practices, life style, and the everyday life of people, is more than evident throughout the book.