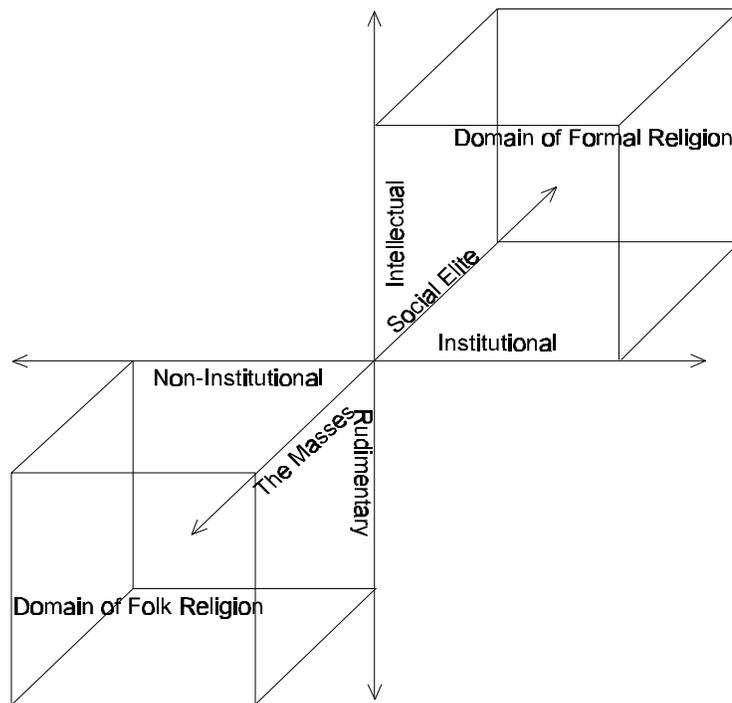


## Folk and Formal Religions

1. What is folk religion and where does it fit in?
  - a. A wide variety of terms has been coined to cover the basic idea (adapted from Schreiter, Constructing Local Theology)
    - i. **Popular religion:** Not popular in the sense of what is fashionable, but in the sense of what is of the people. Three contrasts with official religion may be noted:
      - (1) The non-institutionalized religiosity of the common person: "those patterns of behavior and belief that somehow escape the control of the institutional specialists, existing alongside (and sometimes despite) the efforts at control of these specialists." (Schreiter, Constructing Local Theology, p. 125)
      - (2) The non-elite religiosity of the common person: The more non-literate, nonverbal, and (often) more energetic religious expressions of the non-elite. This is often seen in economic terms, with the lower end of the economic scale belonging to common religion.
      - (3) The less intellectualized religiosity of the common person: Dealing with the quantity and quality of lore, particularly specialized lore.

These three dimensions may be diagrammed:



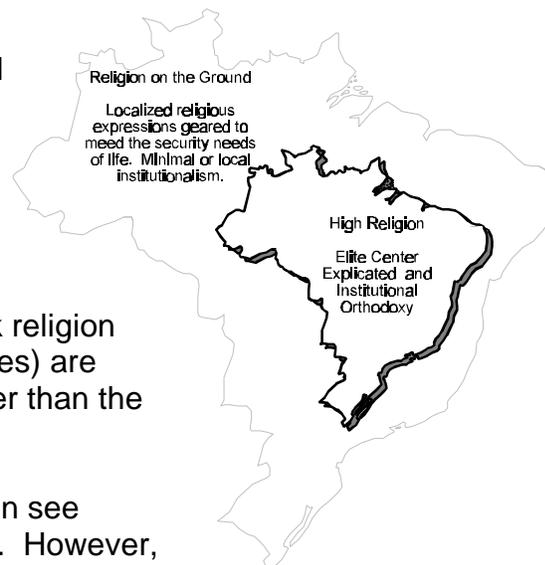
- ii. **Religion on the ground** (a more recent term that avoids some of the pejorative connotations associated with other terms)
  - iii. **Little tradition** (as opposed to "great" traditions, the more orthodox, doctrinally based and priestly executed religious frameworks).
  - iv. **Folk religion:** Again referring to religion "of the people", though with additional connotation of the lower strata of society as the particular "people." The romantic idea involves folk wisdom embodied in proverbs, stories, and myth. The political idea involves a romantic notion of purity untainted by modernity. It is oriented on the earthly, material needs of daily life (see Ching and Kung, Christianity and Chinese Religions, p. 47)
  - v. **Common religion:** (Robert Towler, Homo Religiosus: Sociological Problems in the Study of Religion) The more formal and doctrinal aspects of a religion are generally the domain of specialists. Common religion, on the other hand, is composed of the baseline of the average person's religious response to the daily needs of life.
- b. Meeting human needs: a paradigm for understanding folk religions.

All human beings have needs in three primary areas: appetites (our physical needs), security (emotional needs) and significance (our spiritual needs). Folk religions are those religious dynamics that focus most closely on the day to day security needs we have as people.

We will explore this more thoroughly in the themes section of the course.

c. Folk religions are often portrayed as a mixture of local religious traditions (or "Little Tradition") with animistic beliefs on the pragmatic level. They are thought to be ruled by pragmatism, with the foundational question being, "Does it work?"

- d. In terms of the larger culture, folk religion (and associated animistic practices) are often found at the periphery rather than the social core:
- e. In terms of the individual, we often see orthodox practices at the surface. However,



they can be built on an animistic and folk religious core.

2. A general comparison of high and folk religion (Burnett, Unearthly Powers):

High Religion	Low Religion
Answers cosmic questions: origin of universe, meaning of life	Answers everyday issues: sickness, drought, war
Written text with fixed system of beliefs	No written text. Myths and rituals
Specialist leadership roles	Informal, no specialists
Central institutions: church, mosque, temple. Formal training	Few institutions. Apprenticeship type of training
Formalized moral teaching	Amoral system, pragmatic