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# Early Christianity as a Popular Religiosity in the Mediterranean World

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## ABSTRACT

This article proposes guidelines to interpret historically Early Christianity, from the first to the beginning of the third Century, in the light of recent work on Popular Culture in the Ancient Mediterranean World. That research perspective tries to put Early Christian practices in relationship with cultural perceptions, concrete needs, and expectations of the subaltern groups of the Roman Empire. Ancient Christianity should then be studied mainly by its magical practices, and its popular modes of narrative, who focused on domestic relationships.

*Keywords:* Early Christianity; Popular Religion; Magic; Ancient Narrative

## **El cristianismo primitivo como religiosidad popular en el mundo mediterráneo**

### RESUMEN

Este artículo propone orientaciones para interpretar históricamente al cristianismo primitivo, desde el primer hasta el inicio del tercer siglo, en sintonía con la investigación reciente sobre cultura popular en el mundo mediterráneo. Esta perspectiva intenta relacionar el cristianismo primitivo con las percepciones culturales, las necesidades concretas y las expectativas de los grupos subalternos del Imperio Romano. Proponemos acá que el cristianismo antiguo debería entonces ser mejor estudiado a partir de sus prácticas mágicas, sus modos de narración popular, que ponían énfasis en las relaciones domésticas.

*Palabras clave:* Cristianismo primitivo; Religión popular; Magia; Narrativa antigua

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## 1. Introduction: An Empire for a few

The compendiums of social history on Imperial Rome show surprising data: The elites of Rome, in their three *ordines*, did not cover more than 1% of its total population.<sup>1</sup> That is, within about 60 millions of Empire habitants, there was probably only a small fraction that benefitted from the privileges granted to the elite. However, we must remember that we are not talking about a class society similar to the modern ones that define their social status by capital. For pertaining to the elites, it was necessary to have the correspondent blood, possession, land property and education. There was nothing like the phenomenon we can observe in contemporary occidental societies, namely the social ascenders who, leaving the bottom of the pyramid by means of successful businesses, might possibly reach the top. For being recognized as an elite member, it was necessary to be born into the orders. The class system was relatively static. However, this did not mean that all people below the elites were equal. There were huge differences between qualified workers (like artisans) and day-workers without specific qualification; and in the same way it was not possible to equate slaves who administered affairs and businesses for their masters to slaves who worked in the fields. The differences could be even greater if we compare the documentation referring to men and women, to habitants of the big centers and rural workers of distant regions. One fact, however, made them equal: be it the most successful, be it the ones who worked only to gain their everyday bread, nobody would ever belong to the elites. Their exclusion due to the factors mentioned above was still more enhanced by cultural practices as language, clothing, table manners, in short, by the life style of the elites. The social differences not only existed, they had to be evidenced.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Géza Alföldy, *Römische Sozialgeschichte*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1984), p. 124-125.

## 2. Which perspective on the past?

An aspect frequently mentioned by the Roman historiography is the fact that we have access to the history of this complex and multifaceted society mainly by documentation means which refer to that 1% of the population. To the present, the history of Rome is still written in the form of narratives on emperors, wars and public administration, without asking for the daily life and for the struggles of the remaining 99%. And when there is some asking, it is not seldom made in the perspective of the literate and educated elite.

With the shifts of course in historiography during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, made e.g. by the *Annales* School and mainly by Cultural History, new questions were presented to the past. Indeed, a whole set of issues, until then not considered for being allegedly “too low”, came to offer us ideas about the life of ordinary people in the Empire. It is sufficient to mention the efforts made in this sense in the first volume of the *History of Private Life*, edited by Philippe Ariés and Georges Duby, whose part on the Roman Empire was written by Paul Veyne.<sup>2</sup> In this work we find the approach that starts from the private and domestic relations, with questions about intimacy, family relations, prejudices, excesses, and so on. In spite of the gaps in the documentation, this approach allows us to consider the perspective of ordinary men and women, of the inferior strata of the society. Today, the historiography of Rome in Antiquity disposes of specialized studies on quotidian aspects in the fields of gender, ethnicity, professions, etc. In Brazil, this production which privileges the view from below and the quotidian is aligned to the methodical vanguards of these studies.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Cf. Paul Veyne (ed.), *A History of Private Life, Volume I: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium* (Cambridge- MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

3 I list here some examples: Pedro Paulo Funari, *A Vida Quotidiana na Roma Antiga*. (São Paulo: Annablume, 2003); Lourdes C. Feitosa, *Amor e sexualidade. O masculino e o feminino in grafites de Pompéia* (São Paulo: Annablume/Fapesp, 2005); Pedro Paulo A.; Lourdes C. Feitosa; Glaydson José Silva, *Amor, desejo e poder na Antiguidade. Relações de gênero e representações do feminino* (Campinas: Editora Unicamp, 2003).

In our intention to approach the history in the perspective of popular culture in the Roman Empire, we were inspired by an approach which seems complementary to the perspective of the history of private life. We are talking about of the studies of popular culture in the Middle Ages, made by the Russian historian Aaron Gurevich.<sup>4</sup> Even if the historical period he studied is different, his approach to popular culture as a semiotic system seems us very appropriated also for the study of our sources on Antiquity. Gurevich, who presented his historiographical efforts as allied to the *Annales* School, suggested the developing of a cultural history of the categories by the means of which the popular groups themselves organize their world visions and their social practices. To this aim, he made the analysis of these conceptions as a language system that oscillated between broad categories as time, space, the divinity, etc., and more concrete categories from the labor world. For his study of the popular categories, Gurevich used documents of different semiotic regimes: oral, gestural, written and visual. To study the intersection between texts of the different regimes, he analyzed and compared religious images, visions of the after-world, the literary genre of *exemplum*, instructions for confessions, liturgies, etc. This approach allows describing not only the private life, but also the categories, perception forms and sensibilities of the lower classes in what is called popular culture.

### 3. The field and the range of popular culture

Popular culture is not a field easy to define, principally in Antiquity. The studies of popular culture are dedicated, in their huge majority, to the modern world and mainly to our contemporary world. In this sense, issues like pop culture, mass culture, relations

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4 Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture. Problems of Belief and Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); *Categories of Medieval Culture*, (London/Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985); Aaron Guriévitch, *A síntese histórica e a Escola dos Anais* (São Paulo: Perspective, 2003).

between Medias (e.g. digital) and culture, and the globalization make this field very complex and nuanced.<sup>5</sup> In many aspects, Antiquity scholars cannot benefit much from this debate, as it is the case of the relation between popular culture and the contemporaries Medias. Albeit images, visual urban identity and imperial ideology were central aspects in the social life of Antiquity, we cannot compare them to the intense exposition in all types of image technology and mass images to which people in our contemporary world are subjected.

Also in its social aspect, a definition of popular culture is an undefined and polemical field. What does popular culture refer to? To the culture of all who do not belong to the elite? In this case, would we have to include into popular culture the middle class, a concept which, by the way, did not exist in Antiquity? Or should we limit us to the poorer? But there are poor people who are literate. Or should we lower the level even more, as Carlos Rodrigues Brandão did in his 1986 study *Os Deuses do Povo*,<sup>6</sup> namely to the workers of Brazil's interior, bare of shirt and shoes? There are alternatives to these positions. Due to the complexity of the discussion about the definition of what refers to the elites and what to the ordinary people, Roger Chartier reminds us of the fact that dominant culture is not always received by the dominated exactly as the dominators expect. So the "modes of use" come on the scene; after all, the product imposition by one class on another does not eliminate the «essentially human practice of creating sense».<sup>7</sup> Thus, he suggests that "popular" should be defined on the bases of reception and appropriation, never developed "in a separated and specific symbolic universe".<sup>8</sup> These ideas of Chartier bring us to another author cited in his essay: Carlo Ginzburg. In his classical study of the

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5 For an overview approach of this debate, see: Holt N. Parker, Toward the Definition of Popular Culture, *History and Theory* 50 (2011), 147-170.

6 Carlos Rodrigues Brandão. *Os Deuses do povo. Um estudo sobre a religião popular*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Uberlândia: EDUFU, 2007).

7 "Cultura popular": revisitando um conceito historiográfico. *Estudos Históricos* 8, no. 16, 1995, p. 186.

8 Idem 189.

religious ideas held by heretic Menocchio, from Italian Friuli of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, that came to us only via the inquisition acts, he works with a concept of popular culture which is able to adapt ideas coming from the dominant classes by means of filters that deform these ideas so that they adjust to its knowledge horizon and to its social reality.<sup>9</sup> These approaches permit us to study the popular culture without romantic presuppositions of purism and remember us that the elite's cultural production does not have the final word, that the subjects of the lower classes have something to say, even in the desconfiguration of their readings, in their deformation process.

#### 4. Popular culture in the Roman Empire

For several reasons, and in spite of the above mentioned efforts, the studies of Rome in Antiquity show gaps in the research on how the lower classes lived and how they processed their experience in society. However, I would like to emphasize two recent studies which contribute to the issue with innovating perspectives and orientated me considerably in the treatment of Early Christianity. The first one is the work of Jerry Toner, *Popular Culture in Ancient Rome*, from 2009,<sup>10</sup> who suggests a sophisticated discussion on the subject, avoiding stereotypes like the equation of popular culture exclusively with carnival (or carnivalization), or with folklore. He also resists to a dualist definition of popular culture, in contraposition and isolation to the elite culture. He recognizes that the lower classes are not unified by class interests, and attributes to the popular culture dynamism and elements of intern conflict. Rivalries, disputes, gossip and violence were experienced by these people not only concerning the elites, but also in their intern relations. His approach is very sensible for the intern organization of people's culture and for the language with which they expressed it. Thus he

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9 *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980.

10 Cambridge/Malden: Polity, 2007.

understands that popular culture is mainly oriented towards the solution of problems. He suggests that the Mediterranean societies in Antiquity presumed that the available goods were limited, and that a person could ascend socially within his or her stratum only by means of competition, by appropriation of the goods available to the others. Here we have to add also the high rate of infant mortality and the low life expectancy of people in general. In face of little resources, high taxes, social tensions, and precariousness of sanitary and health conditions, it was necessary to find forms of survival. And this is where the popular culture came on the scene, as a repository of strategies in its narratives (fables, folkloric accounts), in the wisdom of the people (in moral maxims, sayings and in *exempla*), in consultations of oracles and the interpretation of dreams, in technics of protection and problem solution by magical means.

The second work which inspired my approach is the book by Robert Knapp, *Invisible Romans*, published in 2011,<sup>11</sup> whose goal is to «enter into the mind» of the lower classes, understanding their attitudes, fears and hopes. To this aim, the author effects a division of the 99%: ordinary men, ordinary women, the poor, the slaves, the liberated, soldiers, prostitutes, gladiators, bandits and pirates. The main point in his analyses, however, which called our attention, was the comparative proceeding. Being aware of the scarcity of sources on popular culture, Knapp uses basically the following sets of sources: the Greek Magical Papyri (PGM), the New Testament, manuals for dream interpretation, amulets and images, among others. We already observed this comparative proceeding in the work of Toner, when he interprets religion and magic, astrology, and divination applying data and interpretation of dreams as a means to administrate risks, dangers, violence, and poverty. Again, we will comment on these comparative proceedings later on.

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11 Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

## 5. The origin of Christianity in the subaltern groups

Christianity had its origin in the disadvantaged groups of Palestine in the 30ies and 40ies EC., and before the end of the first century, it had already spread through several parts of the Empire, where communities were founded also among groups of disadvantaged. Without counting one or another exception, the members of their communities came from the lower strata, and maybe the main variation between the origins and the first expansion was the fact that it began as a rural movement and became predominantly urban.<sup>12</sup> The expansion that took place in the second century, even including intellectual exponents like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyon, Tertullian, and Marcion of Sinope, among others, did not change this sociocultural profile of Christianity. Nevertheless, in the perspective of my argumentation, the statement that the Christians originated from the lower classes is not sufficient. In this research, I do not focus on the social stratification, but on the question of how the religious movement surges in the combination of categories and issues of the popular culture to which it belongs and how it configures itself as a part of it. Therefore, my issue is the perception and configuration of the world in the perspective of these lower classes which we call popular culture. Thus, the relevance of this proposal is justified by the fact that, even if there is a huge bibliography on the status and the social stratification of the first Christians, their political positions, their relations with the imperial power and their protests against it, we state a considerable gap in studies of Early Christianity and popular culture or, more exactly, of Early Christianity *as* a popular culture.

Repeating the perspective of traditional historiography, New Testament exegesis continues to interpret the history of Christianity in the first and second centuries using the narratives of the elite sources, in the discussion with the Roman juridical system, with

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<sup>12</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, *Os primeiros Cristãos urbanos. O mundo social do apóstolo Paulo* (São Paulo: Edições Paulinas, 1992).



the religious politics of the imperial power, with its administrative measures and how they affected the Empire's populations and the development of Christianity. According to Justin Meggitt, the relation with the popular culture of Rome seems to exegeses like a dialogue with sources of a very strong «atypical and not representative» character.<sup>13</sup> He also emphasizes that exegesis must consider the fact that popular cultures are sufficiently strong to cope with a grade of incompatibility between believes and practices inside their realm. Maybe we see here the reason of the difficulty in Bible interpretation, especially the one which looks for the origin of doctrines and practices which are exemplar for religious institutions. Popular culture inserts issues, categories and sensibilities that bring Christianity more and more into this universe of popular believes which show little organization and are barely reasonable. Meggitt also emphasizes that it is important to consider the reception processes when it comes to study popular culture. When we are in face of a monument of the imperial cult or of an elegiac poem to the Emperor, we have to ask how they were received by common people and by Christians. According to him, this did not happen without appropriation processes that may even implicate rejection. This means that the official may not be overvalued, as the meanings of a text are not received in a direct and transparent way.

The study of Early Christianity in relation to the popular culture of the Empire also presents problems concerning the source delimitation. I faced this problem already in a former text, and it forced me to suggest a delimitation.<sup>14</sup> Here I will resume my argument. To make an analysis of Early Christianity, we cannot, on one hand, accept the New Testament canon as an exclusive textual body. The division between canonical and apocryphal texts is anachronistic and does not stand a historic and literary examination of the texts.

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13 Justin J. Meggitt, Sources: Use, Abuse, Neglect. The Importance of Ancient Popular Culture, in: *Christianity at Corinth. The Quest for the Pauline Church*. Edward Adams and David G. Horrel (editors), (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 242.

14 Paulo A. S. Nogueira, «O cristianismo primitivo como objeto da história cultural: delimitações, conceitos de análise e roteiros de pesquisa», *Antíteses*, v.8 (2015): 31-49.

Also the limit dating of the sources, i.e. from the beginning until the end of the first century, is not adequate. The historical and cultural processes attested in the first writings develop in the following decades, as the separation from Judaism, the identity definitions of the group, the development of literary genres, sets of practices, ritual and semantic configurations of the religious group. These processes can only be studied completely in a long duration, despite of more limited local manifestations. On the other hand, we hold that old writings (and their literary genders) may not be used indiscriminately for the study of Early Christianity. Philosophic and polemical texts and texts of systemizing character cannot be used primarily for the study of this group, and this much less in the perspective we suggest here. The Church Fathers, like Irinaeus of Lyon, Tertullian and Justin Martyr, represent an ecclesial and intellectual elite that does not reflect the issues, preoccupations and forms of expression of a Christianity of popular character.

We suggest that Early Christianity in this initial period reaches from its beginnings until the Constantine period in the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and that the main sources are the New Testament writings and the Apocrypha, primarily in their narrative genres (gospels, acts, apocalypses, among others). In this sense, "Early Christianity" is not only a designation of a religious group, but also of a social stratum and of a cultural level.

## **6. Early Christianity as a popular religiosity of the Mediterranean**

To proceed to our analysis of Early Christianity in relation to popular culture I suggest, as an initial approach, as an access door, a provisory definition of popular culture inspired by the approaches of Terry Toner and Robert Knapp, but this definition may be expanded and changed during the specific analyses. In this perspective, I approach popular culture as a form of elaboration of texts, narratives, poetry, rituals, practice systems, moral references etc. with the aim of orientation and survival in society. With the aim of making

this suggestion clearer, I present in the following a working definition. We emphasize that it does not intend to be exhaustive, but only an initial orientation.

For the aims of this project, which is focused on religious studies, we define popular culture as follows:

«A set of practices and representations of religious order, belonging to subaltern groups of the society, by means of which they cope with social tensions (rivalries, violence, social asymmetry) and shortness of resources for their survival. The texts, rituals, gestures etc. produced in this context are concrete, that is, destined to certain practical functions, and simultaneously complex in their structures, that is, endowed with poetic force and polysemy. These practices and representations are coming from the material world of these groups (even if metaphorically); however, they also may proceed to adaptations of elite's genres and issues in their own perspective. In the case of these adaptations, we see the active reception of literary genres, be it in their emulation, be it in their inversion by means of parody, satire, among others».

Therefore, my perspective is not exclusively the perspective of social history. I do not intend to ask primarily about the issues of social stratification, about production modes or social conflicts. These issues will come on the scene when expressed in the cultural artifacts of the popular culture (fables, fantastic accounts, magic instructions, and texts of Early Christianity, among others). The focus will be put on the cultural categories, in the words of Gurevich, or on the mind-set, according to Toner.

Here are some fundamental presuppositions of this approach to popular culture:

a) Popular culture does not aim coherence or a systematic character.

To the contrary, given its strongly metaphoric and narrative character, we frequently find in its expressions fragmentary, ambiguous, contradictory and grotesque elements. The task of the interpreter is to cope with them and not to look for a certain coherence and rationality as they can be found in the elites' culture.

b) Popular culture has an all-over circulation.

It does not remain restricted to a group. It crosses and influences broad sectors of society. Even if it is a resistance culture, in some

of its manifestations, it is not a culture of a protest group or of a sect, but it virtually pervades the whole society. Indeed, popular culture stands in a process of constant circularity with the elite's culture, even in Antiquity. Although they are antagonist in certain aspects and interests, they do not behave one in relation to the other in an excluding and dualistic form. It is necessary to pay attention to the dynamic reception processes between both of them.

c) Even if popular culture pervades the whole society, its expressions can be studied the best at a local level, given the concrete and pragmatic character of its organization.<sup>15</sup> Its practices and representations are organized in relation to groups, places, traditions, rituals, gesticulations, images etc.

d) Popular culture is a space of power dispute, internally and externally.

Inside the popular culture, there are disputes for agency and leadership (e.g. between magicians). And popular culture is generally viewed with disdain and prejudice by the elite culture. This conflictive aspect coexists with the appropriations that are made on a profounder level.

e) Popular culture coexists with the rhetoric of exclusivity of religious groups.

The rhetoric of exclusivity which the first Christians developed in face of their context appears as an apparent impeditive for its analysis in relation to popular culture. After all, they present themselves as a "holy people", separated by God as "peregrines in the world", as if they would not belong to the world, and they are waiting for the imminent end of the time. Do these elements not point to a religious group that is developing at the margins of culture and that avoids syncretistic relations with its surroundings? Should we not study therefore the Christianity in the first centuries as a movement of resistance against the Empire and as a negation

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<sup>15</sup> David Frankfurter, Beyond magic and superstition, in: *Late Ancient Christianity* (A People's History of Christianity). Virginia Burrus, ed., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 255-284.

of the polytheist culture inside which it was born? Would they not have intended to be an alternative for their society?

Our departure point is that in societies the profound relations to the culture in which they live and develop, beginning with the language, with value systems etc., are not an alternative. This does not imply conformism, because in a society there are several religious, political, moral etc. positions, even within popular culture. However, the articulations in any direction can be made only through categories of world comprehension which are made possible by language. We hold that the exclusive consideration of Early Christianity as an alternative movement, isolated in the Mediterranean society, is a result of a short-sighted analysis that does not consider the rhetoric of this discourse or its broader implications. Research used exhaustively the model of a sectarian religious group, suggesting a model of sociocultural isolation of this group. It is a fact that Christianity, born from a Jewish messianic group in the first century, proposed reforms and paradigm changes in its society, but these changes only could be idealized and communicated based on the cultural standards of the society in which they were inserted.

Thus, putting the focus on the Roman Empire's popular culture in its categories of knowledge, sensibilities and action forms in the world of the great majority of the population, we start from the presupposition that Early Christianity, despite of its rhetoric of exclusion and singularity, and despite of the suspicions the local populations had in face of this group, is constituted and organized by these same parameters of the lowest social strata in the society. It is the culture of average men and women. If this affirmation and starting point of ours are not acceptable, then we have a problem for the history of Christianity in its beginning: How a religious movement that comes from the lower classes and has broad adherence among it, would not constitute itself on the base of their culture?

So it is necessary to approach the subject starting from the presupposition that Early Christianity not only began among plain people, but that it organizes itself as popular religiosity with the

same elements we find in popular religions and religiosities: predominance of the magical practices (healing, protection, oracles), presentation of the its protagonists in the format of plots provided by literature (preceded by its orality) and of the folklore forms, emulation and subversion of morality etc. This change in the problem's formulation may have implications for the research, in the critical discussion of the rhetoric of exclusivity, despite of the difficulties that they present to the research. It is about an effort to see how the religious movement structures itself on the base of categories of its own social stratum and to identify changes, subtle and fundamental, in the interior of these categories.

## **7. The popular element in Early Christianity**

In the following we explicit possible implications of the understanding Early Christianity from the perspective of the popular culture in Mediterranean World.

### ***7.1. For a comprehensive definition religious of adherence to Early Christianity***

Many interpreters of Christianity in the first centuries transfer pious and sophisticated models of adhesion (conversion and following) of the Christianity of his or her own time and institutions to Antiquity. So it is as if there were behind the letters of the accounts, prophecies and exhortations of these old texts concordant men or women in a pious and erudite posture. Fact is that we nearly do not know anything about the form how these people showed their adhesion or how they presented themselves as Christians in Antiquity. We cannot simply presuppose – here I am using an analogy for didactic purposes – that all Brazilian Catholics have the doctrinarian sophistication and the institutional engagement of, e.g., a Jesuit or a Dominican. Catholicism – the same way as protestant groups – has different ways of adhesion to its religious group.

In this text, we shall adapt the gentile belonging models to Judaism in Antiquity, according to Shaye Cohen in his work *The Beginnings of Jewishness*.<sup>16</sup> The model he suggests deals with a belonging that is not determined ethnically, but culturally, and this would perfectly match Christians. According to what Cohen claims, pagans could present themselves as Jews or as sympathizers with Judaism or as worshippers of the God of the Jews, for different reasons, from adhesion *stricto sensu* with circumcision and conversion to Judaism, to intermediate forms of adhesion like adopting Jewish alimentation rules because they thought them healthy or respecting Judaism due to its monotheism and its legal system as superior forms of religion, or also in more general adhesion forms because the God of the Jews had the fame of being powerful, so that he was invoked in magical rituals and formulas together with other powerful gods and goddesses.<sup>17</sup> This comprehensive definition of belonging in several modes, in a broad spectrum, applied to Early Christianity, would permits us to explore possibilities of Christian religious practices among the lower stratum of the Mediterranean populations, among people who have little interest or even little skill for theological issues or sophisticated intertextual playing with Jewish Scriptures. Indeed, many of these religious practices took place in the dynamic space of orality. Variant invocations of Christ, references to the God of the Jews (in fact very common in the Greek Magical Papyri), to the angels, to scenes of the life of Jesus and the apostles, practices of prayer, of commensality etc., and the use of amulets with Gospel passages would be indications of a generic belonging that allow us to understand the adhesion of broad stratum of the population to Christianity. This openness in the concept of adhesion to Christia-

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16 Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness. Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

17 The author gives a list of the different possibilities of belonging to Judaism in the old world, from the most general to most specific: 1. Admiring some aspects of Judaism; 2. Recognizing the power of the God of the Jews; 3. Benefitting Jews or being friendly to Jews in public; 4. Practicing some or a great part of the Jewish rituals; 5. Worshipping the God of the Jews and denying or ignoring all the other divinities; 6. Adhering to the Jewish community; 7. Converting to Judaism and "becoming a Jew". Cf. Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 140-162.

nity in Antiquity is necessary because its study based exclusively on its hard core (whatever this might have been) does not permit us to enter into the universe of the popular, of the religious practices of the illiterate, and into the processes of cultural translation which take place on these frontiers. According to this broad concept, we cannot even presuppose that the confession to the Christ and the exclusivity of any adhesion to him were prerequisites. It could have been sufficient to adhere in one of these forms, even in the most general, so that we can relate people or popular groups as practitioners of Christianity. This “relaxation” of the criteria of belonging would bring us a strong dynamic in the analysis of the relations of Christianity with the popular culture.

### *7.2. The popular as reception by the inferior strata of the society.*

The concept of popular culture which we propose here is dynamic and therefore does not limit itself to what is exclusively produced by these strata. We do not focus on origin, but on dynamic adaptation processes: popular is also the form how the appropriation of symbolic forms (narratives, images, values etc.) is made. Therefore, we focus on the processes of reception as suggested in the definition of popular culture by Chartier and Ginzburg. Here it is also important to take up the role of the *intermediate agent of culture* as suggested by Gurevich. This agent, who can be a small trader, notary, soldier, prostitute, qualified slave – a person who is literate, but not belonging to the elites – is able to transit between the two worlds, translating elements from above to those below, and vice versa. In the case of the medieval world and its popular culture, which was the research object of Gurevich, there were, among others, the monks who mediated the dialogue between the culture of the Church and the culture of their villages. Who would be these agents in Early Christianity? We can barely envisage them on the basis of the poor evidences. Paulo of Tarsus, for instance, was a tent manufacturer, and therefore definitely not belonging to the



high stratum of society, but he dominated elements of the Greek rhetoric and was living in two worlds, the Jewish and the Greek. He belonged to the lower classes, but had access to the expression forms of the elite. Most of these agents, including authors of the Christian narratives, are anonymous. We only know their texts because they hid behind their narratives and heroes. The author of the Acts of the Apostles, e.g., reveals him or herself as a powerful narrator who knows the Jewish Scriptures (the Septuagint, LXX), who is able to combine traditions of different proveniences in a relatively erudite *koinê* Greek. But even so, he follows the Hellenistic presentation model of the narrative's heroes, the apostles, as powerful thaumaturgies. His sophisticated narrative is pervaded by the elements of popular culture. We find similar processes in the other apocryphal acts, where the topics of the miraculous and the fantastic, with insertion of folklore elements (speaking or helping animals) are always present in works in which certain literary aspects tend to emulate the Greek novel.

### *7.3. A comparative approach, in different literary genres and artifacts*

The comparative method is fundamental for the development of this approach. Here the point is not only to compare religious texts, but texts of different literary genres and of different religious belongings, including even different semiotic regimes, as in the case of material artifacts. For a given semantic field or set of practices we should, whenever possible, approach and analyze: a) texts of Early Christianity; b) Roman-Greek literature; c) Greek Magical Papyri; d) manuals of dream interpretation; e) fables and legends; f) moral maxims; g) amulets; h) cultural material, like funeral epigraphy, etc.

Let us look at a concrete example for the study of the sets of preoccupation of lower class women regarding their children: There are instructions on how to educate children and take care of them, reports on healed ill children, spells and incantations for healing children, dream interpretations whose object are children etc.

All these sources coming from popular culture reflect contexts of possible religious practices related to maternity and children. Let us think of a concrete text which is studied in academic commentaries primarily as a messianic and cosmic report: Revelation 12 with the scene of the heavenly woman who is about to give birth and who has before her a dragon about to devour the newborn. A first and possible interpretation is that this child is the messiah, that he is removed by God and consequently protected from the dragon after being born. However, if we ask for contexts of this interpretation and for the reception of this image in the Mediterranean popular culture in a perspective of an exclusive comparison with texts of this social group, we have other interpretation possibilities. An example: a text of Jewish demonology, of the Testament of Solomon, gives the description of the appearance and of the action fields of the most feared demons.<sup>18</sup> One set of them, with the appearance of dragons, is specialized in hurting and killing the unborn babies in the wombs of pregnant women, as well as newborn babies. In the Greek Magical Papyri, on the other hand, there is a series of apotropaic rituals used to keep demons distant from pregnant women which guaranteed a healthy birth. In these examples, we can see that the texts were not only produced in the realm of popular culture, on the base of its issues, for the solution of problems, but as they also were provided of poetry (the imagetic and metaphoric density of the Revelation narrative), they could be recreated in multifaceted ways in the interpretation processes. To be able to open the text and to recreate its popular context of creation and of reception forms, we need to interpret them “running against the grain”, with a focus on the imagetic and in the fields of social life where they come from and to which they could be applied. Revelation 12 could have been received by average women as an invitation to devotions related

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<sup>18</sup> Testament of Solomon. A New Translation and Introduction, by D. C. Duling, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1. *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*. James H. Charlesworth, ed. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983) 935-987. Cf. especially chapters 13 and 14.

with pregnancy. The rescued child that exegeses currently relate to Christ, could simply turn to every newborn.

## 8. Perspectives for further research: magical practices, domestic space and narrating modes

Given the amplitude of the sociocultural field of the “popular culture” in the Roman Empire and also in the (necessary) range of an analysis of Early Christianity in a long duration, we suggest an analysis in three fundamental axes. The first is related to a field of frequent or even characteristic religious practices of the popular culture; the second centers its focus on a social space where this culture can be observed in its intern articulations and in the conflicts with other social stratum; and the third refers us to a space that combines creation and dissemination of narratives, from orality to the creation of narrative niches where the repertoires of popular wisdom are put into circulation.

### 8.1. *The magical practices*

Here we are speaking about the kind of religious practice which is considered popular par excellence, with its pretensions of efficiency, pragmatism and concreteness. It is the form of ancestral religiosity, linked to the origin of religion in prehistory, and broadly disseminated in history, in all cultures and, to the discomfort of a certain research in religion, present in many contemporary societies, including the Brazilian. Magic is broadly documented in Antiquity, especially in the Roman Empire. We have a precious documentation of magical practices in this period due to the publication by Preisendanz in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century of the Greek Magical Papyri,<sup>19</sup> translated to English in the 1980ies by Hans Die-

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<sup>19</sup> Karl Preisendanz; Henrichs Albert, *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2 vols (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1974).

ter Betz,<sup>20</sup> After the publication of this rich library of magic instructions, many other old papyri discovered in Egypt were published, and they attested even more these practices in that period. Among the archaeological remains of magic also amulets occupy a special place.<sup>21</sup> Magic was so disseminated in Antiquity that even the elites not only were interested in it, but practiced it. In Greek and Latin literature we have works that devote part of their plots to magicians, as in the cases of the *Golden Ass*, by Apuleius, and in the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, by Philostratus.

The research on Early Christianity also recognizes the role of magic in its origins, starting with the treatment of Jesus as a Jewish magician in authors like Morton Smith,<sup>22</sup> John Dominic Crossan,<sup>23</sup> and in a more nuanced version Gerd Theissen.<sup>24</sup> The presentation of the apostles in the Acts of the Apostles also follows the standard of presenting them as powerful miracle workers, workers of thaumaturgy, with particular emphasis on Paul of Tarsus. In the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, the apostles are presented as miracle workers who, beyond of private healing practices, show themselves publically in marvelous performances.

It is true that there are certain consensuses on this point, but we do not want to stick to them. There is a very recent discussion in research about the concept of magic and its models in Antiquity. Authors like David Frankfurter, Naomi Janowitz, Susan Greenwood and especially Bernd-Christian Otto problematize our perceptions of magic and identify certain religious contemporary lenses, from the negation of magic or its consideration as a religiosity of second

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20 Betz, ed. by Hans Dieter. *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation Including the Demotic Spells*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

21 Brice C. Jones, *New Testament Texts on Greek Amulets from Late Antiquity*, (London/ New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016); Joseph E. Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits on Amulets from Late Antique Egypt: Text, Typology, and Theory* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

22 Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

23 John Dominic Crossan, *O Jesus histórico. A vida de um camponês judeu do Mediterrâneo* (Rio de Janeiro: Imago, 1994).

24 Gerd Theissen, *Urchristliche Wundergeschichten. Ein Beitrag zur formgeschichtlichen Erforschung der synoptischen Evangelien*, (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1987).

category to its festive idealization through a post-modern look.<sup>25</sup> What is magic in Antiquity? Which are its divisions? Who are its agents? How do they relate among them and how do they relate to their clients? Is the Weberian model which relates the magician to the prophet and the priest really the most adequate model for the comprehension of their role in society? How may we classify the magic agents and their work within a given set of sources or of a specific region? And last, but not least, the central question: How did the magical practices administrate the perception of risks and reflect contexts of the popular culture?

## 8.2. *The space of domestic relations*

The social location par excellence where we can study popular culture in its cooperation and intern and extern tensions is the domestic space. The *oikos* or *domus* was established as a microcosm in which social and cultural relations can be observed in all their complexity. The literature of Early Christianity has many references to this universe, in different literary genres. In the Pauline letters we find many instructions for the adequate conduct in the family life, prescribing exhortations to husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves, and thus forming a specific literary genre: the so-called Household Codes. These sets of instructions can be compared to narratives in which these relations appear in a more contradictory and diffuse form. The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles contain texts which report tense relations between husbands and wives, and between slaves and masters. Here are some

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25 Cf. Otto Bernd-Christian, *Magie. Rezeptions- und diskursgeschichtliche Analysen von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011); David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); David Frankfurter, Dynamics of Ritual Expertise in Antiquity and Beyond: Towards a New Taxonomy of 'Magicians', in: *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, Religions of the Greco-Roman World 141 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 159-178; Susan Greenwood, *The Anthropology of Magic* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2009); Naomi Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World. Pagans, Jews and Christians* (London: Routledge, 2001); Naomi Janowitz, *Icons of Power. Ritual Practices in Late Antiquity* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2012).

examples: The Acts of Andrew give account about a matron who became a follower of Andrew, a foreign leader of a religion without prestige. She can meet the apostle only by bribing a female slave who substituted her in the marital bed. Blackmailing, extortion, and violence are the outcome of this absurd situation. The subject of the intrusion of foreign religious leaders (called magicians) who interfere in domestic relations of elite couples continues in the Acts of Paul and Thecla and in the text on Paul's imprisonment in Ephesus, both in the Acts of Paul. And in the Acts of Peter there is a lot of tensions in Peter's tentative to bring senator Marcelus back to faith, in a dispute with Simon the Magician. The Pastor of Hermas, a text relatively little studied, is a work of prophetic-apocalyptic character, full of visions and angelical interpretations which have as initial occasion the expression, albeit discrete, of a sexual longing of a slave for his mistress. He is severely exhorted by his mistress during a dream, and this might be one of the only reports of dreams and interior, intimate conflicts of a slave in Antiquity. The text also reports the conflictive relations with his wife and children and the implications for his life as a slave/liberated Christian. These few examples are sufficient to see that Early Christianity did not have only radical visions of the transformation of cosmos and society: they also include subjects of ordinary people and relate situations which echo voices from below.

### 8.3. *Narration modes: texts coming from orality and folklore*<sup>26</sup>

Popular culture is structured and cultivated by oral narrative practices which reflect communication inside the families, on the streets, and in the market places. These narratives are forming, over the time, textual niches based on certain literary genres. Thus they create text sets of fables, for instance, in which the imaginary ele-

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<sup>26</sup> I develop these ideas in my book *Narrativa e cultura popular no cristianismo primitivo* (São Paulo, Paulus, 2018; in Spanish published as *El cristianismo primitivo como religión popular*, (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2019), especially in the chapters 3 to 5.

ment is linked to a moral one. In short and emblematic stories, in concrete wisdom, and in formulas for survival in difficult times and conditions they make themselves available to people. The Biblical research, even if motivated by different questions, already developed a theory on the origin of its traditions based on hypotheses, with the aim of explaining processes of orality and formation of *catenae* of narratives or sayings. The *Formgeschichte*, that has its origin in the exegetical research of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was following the folklore studies of its time and offers a theory for understanding the formation of the Jesus traditions. We intend to take up again the question about the popular on this axis and in dialogue with recent researches, like the one of Teresa Morgan who studies, in literary genres like the *exempla* (*chreiai*), the formation and tradition of popular morality in the Roman Empire.<sup>27</sup> On this axis we can explore the text production in Early Christianity between the development of topics of the folkloric narrative with its wisdom element and the adaptation and inversion of *topoi* of the elite literature, as in the case of the Greek novel.

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<sup>27</sup> Teresa Morgan, *Popular Morality in the Early Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2007.

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