

FOLK RELIGION IN NEWFOUNDLAND: THE UNAUTHORISED VERSION

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Abstract

While some aspects of Newfoundland's rich cultural tradition have attracted much scholarly attention, folk religion remains a comparatively neglected field. This article examines the phenomenon known as The Bible of the Folk, stories based on 'the Bible and its silences', showing how the combination of folk religiosity and narrative skills produces amusing, etiological and didactic tales involving biblical characters or located in biblical settings which relate to objects and events in everyday life in Newfoundland. These stories, however, are not simply entertaining; they affect attitudes and behaviour towards the natural world, popular belief and folk medicine. The existence of an 'Unauthorised Version' is not unique to Newfoundland, but the quantity, variety and vitality of such material there is remarkable.

The richness of Newfoundland's cultural tradition in areas such as narrative, music, song and dance is well attested. It is no less rich in the comparatively neglected field of folk religion, which can best be defined as 'the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion.' (Yoder 1974:14)

The people of Newfoundland have probably been neither more nor less religious than their neighbours in Atlantic Canada. However, the remoteness of many outposts, particularly before the advent of electricity and improved communications, has affected the impact of religion. Talking of her community before the road was opened and electricity was laid on, one Branch woman said,

'Twas only religion then, and your day's work. There was no television and there was no cars coming. You done your day's work, and then there was your religion, and the rosary, and your religious books'.....It was a different kind of life then altogether.

There was frequently considerable vulnerability in the face of illness and the elements, and a physically harsh environment. In such situations, in addition to the better documented forms of entertainment, stories of divine intervention in everyday life were accepted and recounted as a matter of

course. There was also a certain amount of pressure towards religious conformity in a community where people's business was not entirely their own, and appropriate behaviour was reinforced by cautionary tales, which might be amusing or dramatic. The pervasiveness of religion in the everyday lives of Newfoundlanders of all denominations has added immensely to the folklore of the island.

The focus of this article is one particular aspect of folk religion, the phenomenon known as 'The Bible of the Folk', which consists of 'the tales which have been derived from the Bible and its silences'. (Utley 1945:1) Moral, explanatory and frequently humorous stories connected with biblical persons and events have been popular for centuries, and most people within a Judaeo-Christian milieu are probably unwitting repositories of Bible of the Folk material. To take a very basic example, readers asked to think of Eden might envisage Adam and Eve, the snake, the tree and the fateful apple in Eve's hand. No doubt it was just moments after this that Adam bit into the fruit, God called out 'Adam!', and the piece of apple got no further than Adam's throat and stuck there. That is why men still have a lump in their throat, their Adam's apple. This, of course, is Bible of the Folk. Although we are told that in Eden there was the Tree of Knowledge, and that it had fruit, there are no apples in Genesis. However, this particular folk elaboration on biblical narrative has become such an accepted part of culture that the apple is rich in symbolism and inextricably linked with Eden, whether in art or literature, Adam's apple or Eve's pudding.

Although narrative is at the core of Bible of the Folk material, this 'Unauthorised Version' can influence many aspects of life, including attitudes and behaviour towards the natural world, foodways, calendar custom, popular belief and folk medicine. One problem with material of this kind right up to the present day has been that collectors have frequently been so obsessed by its origins, its quaintness or its wrongness, that not enough attention has been paid to why such material exists and how it functions. These issues can only adequately be addressed when we know something of who the material was collected from, where the person learned it, how the person regarded it, whether it affected belief or behaviour, which religious denomination the person belonged to and so on. For these reasons, I was delighted to have the opportunity to collect Bible of the Folk material in the field and also to discover a significant quantity of such material in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA). By citing a variety of examples of the Unauthorised Version in Newfoundland and giving some indication of its impact there, I hope to give a

flavour of this phenomenon and the part it has played in the folk religious life of Atlantic Canada.

The Bible contains, as one informant put it, 'some right good stories', but there is also a tantalising lack of detail at many points. The Bible of the Folk tends towards elaboration upon basic biblical fact, the couching of scriptural events in familiar terms and even familiar locations, and a fascination with etiology. The central tenets of Christianity that God becomes man, that God participates in the affairs of humans, that the past continually affects the present are played out in greater and often more homely detail than scripture allows. Such lore is not the exclusive preserve of any particular Christian denomination and indeed the similarity of material in communities of Irish Catholic and West Country English descent in Newfoundland is striking.

Noah is a scriptural figure whose activities can be neatly tied to the Flood period but he is not a devotional figure, nor does he have any power. The setting of incidents on or around the Ark is virtually a 'once upon a time' framework, although nominally biblical. There is thus more scope for humour with Noah and his Ark, being far enough removed from the more sombre events of Christ's life for this not to be 'unseemly'. The appeal of the Flood story is still very much alive, as seen in popular culture by the number of cartoons and greetings cards featuring Noah, the Ark and variations thereon.

As Noah and his Ark have excited people's imaginations for centuries, it is thus no surprise to find a considerable quantity of pseudo-biblical folklore associated with this one man who 'found grace in the eyes of the Lord'. (Genesis 6:8). (Through pictures and the song, the mere mention of the ark conjures up visions of the animals going in 'two by two'. That is, of course, if they were ritually unclean animals; if they were ritually clean animals or any kind of bird, Noah was ordered to take on seven pairs of each. However, 'the ritually clean animals and birds went in fourteen by fourteen' does not have the same ring to it somehow.) Narratives set on or around the Ark with Noah as the main character form the largest group of Bible of the Folk tales in MUNFLA. The Newfoundland Flood stories tend to be etiological and, for the most part, amusing, as in this example:

During the great flood, on Noah's Ark Noah's wife discovered a small leak in the bottom of the boat. There being no-one near-by to take some action she quickly placed her hands over it and proceeded to call out for help. No-one came, however, and soon a dog wandered by. She thereupon engaged the dog to put his nose in the

hole and slow the leak while she ran to fetch Noah. She found Noah and told him what happened and he sent her to find the carpenter while he went to the site of the leak to see if there was anything he could do in the meanwhile. When he arrived he found that the hole had grown too large for the dog's nose, so to save the day Noah sat down on the leak, until the carpenter finally arrived and fixed it. The moral of the story is this: herein is the explanation as to why a woman's hands are always cold, a dog's nose is always cold and a man always stands with his back to the fire. [MUNFLA 70-9/86, Shearstown]

Flood stories are awash with a phenomenon known as folk etymology, whereby words are broken down into identifiable smaller parts, which may or may not reflect their true history. The Flood story which appears most frequently in MUNFLA concerns Noah and a goat. In these cases the monosyllabic 'goat' is broken down into 'go it' or 'go out', as in this story:

When Noah was discharging the animals after the flood, he found an animal with shaggy hair and a whisker and its horns turned straight up. This animal was very stubborn and would not move for him, so he said 'go out' but he said it so fast the people thought he said 'goat' and as a result people called the animal the 'goat' afterwards. [MUNFLA 70-14/126, Pointe Verde]

Of the Newfoundland 'Noah and Goat' stories, however, my favourite contains not only folk etymology, but the precise location of Noah's accent:

When Noah was loading the animals on to the Ark, the goat (as yet the goat didn't have its name) was very slow and Noah cried out 'Go it' (meaning 'hurry up!'). Noah was supposed to have an accent like the people from Winterton, Trinity Bay, as a result it was pronounced as g-o-a-t. [MUNFLA 66-2/188, Victoria]

This narrative contains a fine piece of 'blaison populaire' about the accent in the place referred to, demonstrating the value of some knowledge of linguistics and dialectology to the folklorist.

Although we read in Genesis 8:4 that the ark came to rest 'upon the mountain of Ararat', the biblical account omits that before doing so it passed over a particular field in Branch, St Mary's Bay.

When I was out in Branch five or six years ago I said to this farmer who was there, I

said 'The field there', I said, 'look at the rocks there; funny place to try and farm with all those rocks. How'd they get there?' 'Oh', he said, 'I'll tell you a story now, how they got there.' He said 'These rocks were the ballast that Noah used for the ark and when he was passing over here and the waters were getting lower and so on and he was throwing out the ballast, this is where he dumped some of his ballast.' [MUNFLA 64-2/1] This is a fine example of localisation of biblical events, told not with the expectation of belief, but with the intention of establishing a link in the mind of teller and listener between the local and the biblical. Why should it not have been so?

After the Flood, according to Genesis 8:19, 'every beast, every creeping thing, and every fowl and whatsoever creepeth upon the earth went forth out of the ark.' It would seem from the tale found in MUNFLA 60-12/65 that this oversimplifies the event somewhat:

When Noah's Ark had finished its long trip and the animals were getting off the ark the two fish lagged behind and did not want to get off for some reason or other. So Noah grabbed one of them by the tail just as it was getting back on the ark and said 'Ha Dick, I catcha!'. The fish wriggled free of Noah's grasp and escaped. But it retains the name 'Haddock' to this day. The print marks of Noah's finger and thumb can be seen on the haddock's tail and the black streak marks up both its sides were made as it wriggled from Noah's fingers. [St Lawrence]

Narratives such as this are obviously entertaining, like pseudo-biblical 'Just So' stories. Their attraction lies in using a biblical setting ingeniously and explaining familiar aspects of human behaviour or the natural world. Similarly, relating the known world to scriptural events, it is said by some that seals are the people who were drowned at the time of the flood, though seals have also been connected with fallen angels, or men from Pharaoh's army who drowned when the Red Sea closed.

In terms of settings, if Noah's Ark is the most popular in the Old Testament, the Flight to Egypt has proved a most fertile backdrop for Bible of the Folk material. The Flight to Egypt was an extremely popular subject in medieval art and drama, for it was a time filled with danger for the Holy Family as it fled from Herod's army, and a period which in popular tradition contained many miracles. However, the only scriptural reference to it appears in Matthew 2:13 and 14:

... the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother and flee into Egypt and be thou there until I bring thee

word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt.

It is interesting that a number of Flight to Egypt stories enjoy circulation in Newfoundland, three of which I have chosen as representative samples. According to MUNFLA 73-97/33,

The robin accompanied Mary, Joseph and Jesus on their flight to Egypt. The robin was sitting on a tree and was to warn Joseph of any danger (people coming) so that he could keep the child from harm. Some men were coming toward the camp and heard Mary and Joseph talking. They burned the area in hopes that the family would be burned to death. The robin was first to see the fire and smoke. He began singing (as a warning) and Mary, Joseph and the child fled from the flames and danger. By this time the fire was quite close to the camp site and the robin was burned. When Mary saw the bird being burned she said 'From this day forward you shall have a red breast, so the world will know you saved us'. [Northern Bay, Catholic]

Another narrow escape for the Holy Family involved a spider:

It is unlucky to kill a spider at our house for we were taught to believe that it was a spider who saved the boy Jesus from Herod's wrath when he had ordered all first born male children to be killed. The story goes that Joseph, Mary and Jesus fled into Egypt and on the way they came to a forked road where after they passed on the spider spun her web across the way. Now when Herod's soldiers came to this fork they wondered which road they would take and while trying to decide they discovered the spider's web. 'No-one could have gone this way', they said, so therefore they took the other road and so Jesus escaped. [MUNFLA 71-93/10, St Joseph's Salmonier, Catholic]

There is a similar story in which a cockroach, also standing at a fork in the road, assists Herod's troops by waving his feelers in the direction taken by the Holy Family; for this perfidy, cockroaches are to be despised and killed.

A final Newfoundland Flight to Egypt story explains the Christmas tree, a comparatively late addition to Newfoundland Christmas celebrations.

When the Holy Family were fleeing from the wicked King Herod, at one time during the journey there was danger that they would be caught by the King's soldiers. Jesus, Mary and Joseph were making their way quickly along the road towards Egypt and were being followed by soldiers. All of a sudden a fir tree appeared before them,

opened up and the Holy Family hid inside the tree. The tree then took its place among the other trees, and the Holy Family were safe from the soldiers. It is for this reason that the fir tree is very special and we honour it at Christmas by decorating it and making it part of our celebration. [MUNFLA 68-19/121, St John's]

It is noticeable that there is an element of moral judgement in connection with Flight to Egypt stories. This was a time of danger for the Holy Family, and to some extent the natural world gets divided into 'goodies and baddies'. The spider is a good thing, it helped, we should not kill it. Instead of just saying that cockroaches are dirty or repulsive, we explain why they are bad and deserve to be killed. Unlike Flood stories, there tends to be no humour connected with the Flight. (However, one Newfoundlander attributed the smell of hawthorn blossom to the fact that on the Flight to Egypt Mary hung Jesus's nappies on a hawthorn tree to dry.)

Given the importance of the fishing industry to Newfoundland, it is hardly surprising that fish feature in pseudo-biblical folklore. The haddock in particular receives a lot of attention in the Unauthorised Version, the common factor in all the stories being the notion that the black marks on the fish are, in fact, finger prints. This marking has, however, been associated with a number of actors and incidents. I have already mentioned the episode located on the Ark, where Noah grabs the fish and shouts 'Ha Dick I gotcha!'; which is very much in the knockabout style of Flood narratives. However, the haddock also has New Testament connections. In Matthew 17:27 Jesus instructs Peter to go to the lake and drop in a line; 'Pull up the first fish you hook and in its mouth you will find a coin worth enough for my temple tax and yours.' In the Centre d'Etudes Franco-Terreneuviennes the following is recorded:

l' contont qu' Saint Pierre a mis son pouce su' l'haddock et c'est pour ca qu'il est nomme l'haddock et l'machine qu'a la c'est la marque a Saint Pierre. [Thomas - Cape St George 103 (F1 755/74-195)]

Another group of haddock stories is connected with the feeding of the five thousand. One such narrative records:

This fish was roasted to feed the people and when someone's hand touched him they left their finger mark in the soft, roasted skin. Thus the haddock got his spots. [MUNFLA 65-11 ,Ms p20, Culls Harbour, Protestant]

In another Newfoundland legend, Christ is involved in the marking of the haddock, though the setting is unspecified:

On the back of a haddock there is the print of a finger and thumb. The story is that this fish was picked out of the water by Christ in order to have food. Seeing that this was a great honour, Christ left a sign on the fish's back for all men to see. Thus from that day to this the haddock has a finger and thumb imprint on its back. [MUNFLA 73-175/33, Harbour Grace, Catholic]

The Bible of the Folk narratives recorded thus far have been primarily entertaining and explanatory, but they tie the mundane to events of great moment, so that the familiar objects themselves take on religious significance. However, the influence of the Unauthorised Version on attitudes and behaviour towards the natural world is particularly marked in connection with Easter. Some of this Bible of the Folk material is well known. The donkey, for example, has a cross on its back because it carried Jesus, while the wren is cursed because it helped to lead the soldiers to Christ in Gethsemane. The robin's red breast, elsewhere attributed to fire, has frequently been associated with Christ's blood. One Newfoundland version records:

The robin was hauling thorns out of Christ's head and one of them stuck in his breast. As a result blood flowed out and covered his breast feathers. [MUNFLA 7-14/129, Branch]

The gospels remain silent as to whether Judas Iscariot spilt the salt at the Last Supper, although one informant attributed his subsequent bad luck to this.

Central to Easter and Christianity itself is the crucifixion of Christ on a cross made of wood. In Newfoundland, as elsewhere, there are stories and proofs to support the claim of a variety of trees to be 'the tree of the cross'. For Newfoundlanders working in the woods, observation and speculation have resulted in the aspen, the juniper and the dogwood being the trees most frequently associated with the cross. Typical of the case for the aspen is 'Christ's cross was made from an aspen (hapse) and that is why the leaves always tremble' [MUNFLA 70- 21/121, Elliston]. Also known as the 'quaking aspen', the tree is said to be quaking at the memory of the crucifixion.

The claim is made for the juniper because its top points east, which is variously said to signify it pointing to Calvary, pointing to the Holy Land or

pointing to the direction from which Christ will arise at his second coming. One of the more spectacular supports for the juniper's authenticity is the following:

Every year on Good Friday it is believed that juniper trees bleed. This is tied to the religious belief that Jesus Christ was hung on a cross made from a juniper tree and the blood is the Saviour's blood. [MUNFLA 71-6/15, St Anthony, United Church]

It seems there were also practical reasons for the juniper's negative associations:

My husband has always heard it said that the Juniper Tree is the tree Christ was crucified on. People in Grand Bank who go into the woods cutting firewood never like cutting Juniper. The tree is so tough, springy and misshapen that it seemed to be cursed. You could only cut down one or two of these trees and a sharp axe would become dull and useless, so people cut fir and spruce instead. [MUNFLA 74-131] In this case one can see the possibility of two sets of logic at work - the observation that juniper is more difficult to cut, and the avoidance of it justified by the accusation that it is the tree of the cross, or the belief that it is the tree of the cross simply being confirmed by its awkwardness.

Nevertheless, it is for the dogwood tree that the most numerous and varied tales exist. Because the dogwood was used for the cross, it is said, it has not grown straight or to a large size ever since. The berries too are explained in these terms:

The story says that Christ was killed on a cross made from the wood of the Dogwood Tree. Because of this the berries on the Dogwood Tree today are a bright red and taste very bitter. The colour red symbolises the colour of the blood Christ spilt on the cross and this bitterness symbolises the suffering and agony experienced. [MUNFLA 74-130, St Alan's, Catholic]

On the outer bark of the tree are brown spots, said to resemble the rust spots of nails; furthermore, 'When dogwood is cut you can see red streaks on it inside. This is Christ's blood'. [MUNFLA 68-20/157]

A brief survey of MUNFLA folk medicine material revealed a close association in Newfoundland of these trees of the cross with traditional remedies. Aspen was connected with curing convulsions, while juniper leaves and berries appear in the remedies for a number of ailments, including

colds, weak kidneys and sores in the mouth. Dogwood is associated with healing hernias, respiratory ailments, coughs and 'summer complaint'. The connection between the tree of the cross and medicinal qualities is interesting, raising the question of whether the curative powers of these trees helps to foster their identification with the cross. Alternatively, they may be assumed to have healing powers because of their status as tree of the cross.

The latter was certainly the case according to one person from Englee, who claimed that for the people of that community the dogwood was 'the special tree':

Because the cross was made from Dogwood the powers of Christ passed onto it as a result of him dying upon it. Hence if a leg was broken a splint would be made of Dogwood, for its power would make the leg heal more quickly. [MUNFLA Survey Card 70-12-116]

However, it was claimed, people would not use dogwood for firewood because this would abuse the meaning of the tree and decrease its powers. Another connection between the cross and the dogwood tree was made in a different part of Newfoundland, Cape la Hune. Here tiller sticks of boats were ideally made of dogwood. One man stated that his grandfather would spend days in the woods looking for a suitable dogwood stick, dogwood trees not being common on that part of the coast, and that this custom of having dogwood tillers came from the belief that the cross on which Jesus died was of dogwood. In these examples it becomes clear that Bible of the Folk material links the mundane to the momentous in a manner which is not simply entertaining. It actually affects behaviour and expectations.

What I have related so far has but scratched the surface in terms of the Bible of the Folk material which has circulated and is still current in Newfoundland. It is in many cases a narrative response to the world, not unlike the Bible upon which it is based. The same process, the same intent, is there in much of the Bible of Folk material, though often dealing with matters of less moment. Why does the robin have a red breast? Why doesn't the dogwood grow straight and tall? Why is it unlucky to kill a spider? The Bible of the Folk is not so much about getting the Bible wrong, as expanding it to encompass the things in everyday life which somehow, almost inexplicably, got left out in the first place. In it, the cosmic struggle of good and evil is played out in day to day objects and events, through it the mundane world is sacralised.

The Bible of the Folk is not specific to Newfoundland, but

Newfoundland is particularly rich in this sphere, as in so many aspects of cultural tradition. This has of necessity been a fairly superficial survey of a fascinating area of folk religion, but I trust it has increased awareness of the range, the pervasiveness and the vitality of the Unauthorised Version, and the joy to the folklorist of working in Atlantic Canada.

References

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