

The Holy and everyday life among Brazilian Lutherans: Syncretisms

*Oneide Bobsin*¹

*We feel,
Therefore we think,
Therefore we are.*²

ABSTRACT

The article is a theoretical effort to understand the religious practices of “laypersons” in the submersed part of church institutions. Such religious practices, called “popular religiosity” by sociology of religion in Brazil, are exemplified by three different characters, one of whom is taken from a work of fiction of Brazilian literature. They do not break with the official political or ecclesiastical order but reinterpret institutional discourses in the pragmatic dynamics of the search for a religion of survival. The socio-existential dilemmas of their everyday lives mark their utterances in the search for meaning, particularly in the area of health and the precariousness of the world of labor. They navigate through the official utterances of institutions and express the worldview and the needs of the poor population strata, but not only of the latter. Persons of the affluent classes also turn to the religiosity of the underground of social life. They act on the margins of institutions and in many cases create their own churches or religious organizations or are committed to them in various ways. Finally, the article also points to a theological effort—still in embryo—to understand religious practices that coexist with official discourses.

KEYWORDS

The Holy; Everyday Life; Syncretism; Brazilian Lutherans.

Irrational preliminaries

After Rudolf Otto brought back Tersteegen, whose hymn was sung during the worship services in my childhood, anything I say will be under the half-shadows of “God is present, let

¹ Doutor em Sociologia Política (PUC-SP), é professor da Faculdades EST, São Leopoldo, RS, Brasil.

² MARZUI, Ali. A. and AJAYI, J. F. A de. “Tendências da filosofia e da ciência na África”. In: *História Geral da África*. África desde 1935. Brasília: MEC; UNESCO, 2010, vol. VIII, p. 763. [English version available at https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/file%20uploads%20/general_history_africa_viii.pdf. Quotation at p. 635].

all in us be silent”³ and under the twilight of the perception that “A god comprehended is no God.”⁴ When I looked at my childhood, marked by the loose liminality of the pietism of the Lutheran Church hymnal *Hinos do povo de Deus* (vol. 1) and the left-wing populism of my family in a hybrid religious context, I obediently remained silent when faced with the proposition of the topic made by colleagues as an “extra nos.” However, I try not to surrender to the *a priori*—which is independent of experience—even if the latter is almost always rather opaque, or indeed already fossilized, since it refers to “a religious experience that disappeared long ago,” according to Rubem Alves⁵. Minimizing Alves, maybe the experience is submersed, guiding the search for obscure topics.

As I recognize my groping in the academic world, I take refuge in a retrospective of reports and cases that, more than illustrations, have become silent references in the still unconcluded attempt to reflect on the “religious underground of church life,”⁶ which was the theme of my inaugural lecture at Faculdades EST in 1996. These reports and cases, observed in the practice of the pastoral ministry and discussed with my colleague Vítor Westhelle before he returned to the USA in 1992, surprised me, some time later, as theorizations in dense texts published in the journal *Estudos Teológicos*, which I will take up again as a theoretical contribution to this lecture.

In this academic activity, after eight years during which I was involved in managing the presidency of Faculdades EST, when I was able to be delighted about its underground and hidden curriculum, I recently encountered texts by Latin American authors, already known to many, which see European Colonialism as the dark side of modernity. The underground of the institutions guided by the modern spirit protects itself against the latter when it intends to safeguard dignity and work through the pains lived in them and by them. In this imbroglio the report seeks concepts but does not attach itself to them, like a bird in a cage. After all, “a god comprehended is no God” (Otto), a phrase that could be Brazilianized through another one heard by the skillful researcher of the Brazilian people’s holy things, Carlos Rodrigues Brandão, when he investigated the festivals of the divine Holy Spirit in Goiás. He heard the following from a participant in the dances: “Those who know dance, those who do not know do research.” I went to do research in order to know, like someone who observes from outside and picks up “empty signifiers,”⁷ as though there were no words yet for realities that have not been clearly determined. About the presence of the holy in popular culture, Brandão said:

... it appears alive and in multiple shapes and, more than in other sectors of production of social life forms and their symbols, it exists in a clear state of lively struggle, sometimes for survival, sometimes for autonomy, amid profane and sacred encounters between the erudite domain of the dominant and the popular domain of the subaltern.⁸

³ TERSTEEGEN, Gerhardt (1697-1769). In: IECLB, *Hinos do povo de Deus*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 1997, vol. 1, hymn 124. In his analysis of Tersteegen’s hymn, Otto refers to remaining silent, not because of fear, but as “spontaneous reaction to the feeling of the actual *numen praesens*.” OTTO, Rudolf. *O Sagrado. Os aspectos irracionais na noção do divino e sua relação com o racional*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal/EST; Petrópolis: Vozes, 2007, p. 108. [English version available at https://ia600300.us.archive.org/10/items/theideaoftheholy00ottouoft/theideaoftheholy00ottouoft_bw.pdf. Quotation on p. 71].

⁴ OTTO, 2007. p. 36.

⁵ ALVES, Rubem. *O enigma da religião*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1975. p. 14.

⁶ BOBSIN, Oneide. O subterrâneo religioso da vida eclesial: intuições a partir das ciências da religião. *Estudos Teológicos*, 37/3, p. 261-289, 1997.

⁷ LACLAU, Ernesto. *A razão populista*. São Paulo: Três Estrelas, 2013. p. 115-122.

⁸ BRANDÃO, Carlos Rodrigues. *Os deuses do povo*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1980. p. 17.

In a study performed by the Dutch anthropologist André Droogers, who taught at Faculdades EST in the 1970s, among Pomeranian Capixaba communities in the State of Espírito Santo connected to the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil, he described the religiosity of those people in the following manner:

Popular religiosity, as I wish to use the concept here tentatively, is the religious experience elaborated, in the course of history, by lay people guided by their social position and acting out of the control of the clergy and of the Church as an institution. This religiosity enables direct contact with the holy, without going through the priest as an intermediary.⁹

These concepts concerning the holy in popular culture will still be problematized in this text based on the coexistence of forms of knowledge as an epistemology that overcomes abyssal thinking—as described by Boaventura de Sousa Santos—which generates hierarchies in the knowledge marked by the monoculture of knowledge. Otto’s “irrational” will come into play without the counterpoints or dualisms of the rational turned toward erudition and the “irrational” as though it were typical of the diffuse holy without intermediation of the priest. This is the main point of the present text, which will take obscure paths, recalled by Clifford Geertz when he mentions a statement by Leo Steinberg on theoretical stalemates of anthropology in the last century, around the 1960s:

Only if we abandon ... that sweet sense of accomplishment which comes from parading habitual skills and address ourselves to problems sufficiently unclarified as to make discovery possible, can we hope to achieve work which will not just reincarnate that of the great men of the first quarter of this century, but match it.¹⁰

1. Different places and moments All Hallows Hill

The Mirror Hill [“Morro do Espelho”] in São Leopoldo, as a Lutheran theological locus, did not manage to tame the strange holy of its entrails. Very close by, if we think geographically, but very far from here, if we think theologically, used to live a black family that was employed by the institutions to perform general services. The uncle, who worked at Colégio Sinodal¹¹, brought his brother to work at the Instituto Pré-Teológico [a Lutheran pre-theological school]. He, in turn, brought Claudio Soares, known as Pelé, from Vila Esperança¹². Claudio was the son of a woman who had “nerve trouble” and died early. Adopted when he was a few years old, the boy came to live at Morro do Espelho, and when he grew up became an employee of general services at Faculdades EST. Pelé told me: “Professor, try to understand, because my life is a mess. I was adopted, and the man who became my father was the uncle of my biological mother.”¹³

⁹ DROOGERS, André. *Religiosidade popular luterana*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 1984. p. 7.

¹⁰ GEERTZ, Clifford. *A interpretação das culturas*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1978. p. 102 [English version available at https://monoskop.org/images/5/54/Geertz_Clifford_The_Interpretation_of_Cultures_Selected_Essays.pdf. Quotation on p. 88].

¹¹ Lutheran elementary and secondary school connected to the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil.

¹² Low income neighborhood in the city of São Leopoldo, about 2 Km from Faculdades EST.

¹³ Informal interview given on September 7, 2015, Brazilian Independence Day. The interviewee lives at a street whose name reminds one of a Bier [family surname] in the Feitoria neighborhood, which reminds one of the overseer who illtreats the slaves. In the Feitoria neighborhood there is a house in memory of the German

A few meters from their work place at the Instituto Pré-Teológico, with a strong German tradition, where today is the Library of Faculdades EST, lived Pele's adoptive parents, in a house given to them by the educational institution. There lived four adopted children and another five belonging to the couple, Vicentina S. de Jesus and Mister Laureando. Vicentina de Jesus, whose name carries a religious identity, was a *benzedeira* [female folk medicine healer, faith healer]. According to Pelé, she saw people from Monday to Friday, up to 20 persons a day, in the living room of her small house. Pelé, as child and youth, observed everything. And he has a lot to tell: "My mother treated the poor and the rich." He mentions city authorities, such as former mayors and a doctor's mother in law, healed by his mother. They asked her to bless them against evil eye, greedy eye, they sought *benzeduras* [blessings] to return to good health, save marriages and keep jobs. While he cited the rites, he interrupted his not very linear utterances with names of people from Morro do Espelho and from Faculdades EST whom I shall not name and who came to his mother for help.

"Professor, to be cured it is necessary to have faith, it is faith that cures; to become a *benzedeira* you also have to have a strong faith." His mother had a sister who was also a *benzedeira*. As problematized in the motivational text of the *Fides et Ratio* Seminar, which we displace as does a "messy" thinking: the point is not to establish another history of thinking, an alternative red thread, a hidden tradition, but to "*detect places and moments* when something different happens."¹⁴ It is difficult to grasp how much our interlocutor refers to different places and moments, but he emphasized that he was baptized as a Lutheran at the "Clock Church" (this name, "Igreja do Relógio", is a temple identified by the clock tower, and not by its denomination), in São Leopoldo, and was taken there by a woman of German extraction who also became his godmother, but whose surname he cannot recall.

A German-Brazilian *benzedor* [male folk medicine healer, faith healer]

Far from Morro do Espelho, but close to my congregational experience of childhood and youth, when I lived as a "successor" of people who were healed and acted as healers, in a context to which I recently gave the name "Protestantism Brazilian style," in a valley ignored by ecclesiastic historiography¹⁵, descendants of Germans kept slaves for work and young female

immigration to the state of Rio Grande do Sul, because they arrived there in 1824. Pelé gave this interview at his home. He gave me written permission to use it for publication. The author of this article has the copy of the letter of authorization. [Translator's note: The words "mess" and "messy" (in the sense of "untidy", "not in conformity with norms or expectations") used here as the translation of the Portuguese terms "rolo" and "roleiro" have a very specific meaning. They are intended to refer to activities and practices in various areas of personal and societal life—including family relationships, commerce or religion—that move in a sort of "grey area" between established, socially approved or legally regulated activities or practices and others that are in tension or contradiction with them. These words do not necessarily entail a moral judgment on these "messy" activities and practices nor on the persons who exercise them but point out their essentially ambiguous character.]

¹⁴ Motivational text of the *Fides et Ratio* International Seminar, p. 1.

¹⁵ The congregations of Petrópolis, in Rio de Janeiro, and of São Leopoldo, in Rio Grande do Sul, are references of the early days of Lutheranism in Brazil. The Evangelical Lutheran congregation of Três Forquilhas, north coast of Rio Grande Sul, founded in 1826, did not receive the same references from church historians. It was only recently that Martin Dreher and Marcos Witt did research on the German immigration in the Valley of Três Forquilhas. DREHER, Martin Norberto (Ed.). *Degradados de Mecklenburg-Schwerin e os primórdios da imigração alemã no Brasil*. São Leopoldo: Oikos, 2012. Overleaf the same content is presented in German. WITT,

slaves for extramarital affairs. Recently a deacon of the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB) in the Rio Grande do Sul mountains, whose name I will not tell, died. He wanted to study theology but did not know enough German. He did not pass the entrance exam but did not give up working for IECLB. Stubbornly he saw in his work as deacon the fulfillment of his calling. He became a deacon. He was the descendant of a Lutheran “colonel” who had had an extramarital affair with a poor black woman, also a Lutheran. The “colonel” was a descendant of Pastor Carl Leopold Voges. His social situation and his status in local politics did not allow him to publicly admit paternity, but everyone made believe that they did not know and the Church did not refuse baptism—after all, as people say, it is not the child’s fault.

Into that context, in which with the presence of blacks and indigenous people was ignored, came the Azoreans who brought cassava flour to make rusks to be served with the churrasco of the gauchos of Rio Grande do Sul, Uruguay and Argentina, at the congregational Kerb festivals (celebrating the consecration of the temple) and the Harvest festivals, together with small potatoes that identified German-Brazilian people as “potato Germans” [“alemão batata”]¹⁶. They were served with German yeast cake. This “syncretic” dish also revealed a hybrid life with a strong Lutheran community presence, whose population went for *benzeduras*, despite the pastors’ criticism.

Approximately ten years ago I interviewed an Evangelical Lutheran *benzedor*, whom I gave the fictitious name of Luiz Pereira Mossmann (LPM), the son of a father of Portuguese extraction and a German Brazilian mother. His mother, a strong woman who stood up to the pastor, used the prayers in a German dialect, handing over the secrets of the trade of *benzedeira* to her youngest son. He made it a condition of the interview that my father should be present as a kind of witness so that it would be clear that he was not the only one who worked outside ecclesiastical power. During the entire interview he cited my paternal grandmother as somebody who knew these types of *benzedura* [blessing], which she practiced. My father remained silent, because he was in the presence of someone of the erudite clergy, his son, from whom he expected criticism of the work as *benzedor*. He bowed his head because he had learned from the pastors that *benzedura* is superstition and superstition is denial of faith in the true God: ergo, sin. Although combatted by the pastors, LPM participated every Sunday in the worship service. Even though there was an abyssal distance between himself and the pastor, elaborated by official theology, his religious system made two complementary systems coexist. He sought in the sermons the justification for “mixing” different aspects. Thus, he resigified the sermon of Pastor Ernesto Fischer:

Every person has the right to bring together the words of Holy Scripture and try to update them. And also to pray for what you need, in this case, illness. So I really enjoyed that part. I went home and kept this prayer, because I am a person who keeps a lot in their memory ... To read, to join up the words... Even from the Lord’s Prayer I could bring out some word and join it up.¹⁷

Marcos Antônio. *Em busca de um lugar ao sol*. Estratégias políticas – imigração alemã no Rio Grande do Sul. Século XIX. São Leopoldo: Oikos, 2008.

¹⁶ The children played in the community school with a refrain, as though Germans were always the other, who deserved a prejudicial distinction: “Potato German, kick in the butt and slap on the face.”

¹⁷ BOBSIN, Oneide. “Protestantismo à brasileira: Vale Três Forquilhas”. In: *Uma Religião Chamada Brasil*. Estudos sobre Religião e Contexto Brasileiro. Oneide Bobsin Rogério Sávio Link Nivia Ivette Núñez de la Paz Iuri

LPM is a *benzedor* [faith healer], recognized by people who mainly belong to the local Lutheran church, but he is also named in this way by the religion that criticizes him. He refers to a remark made by the pastor: “Look, be careful of the greedy eye.” The pastor himself asks the *benzedor* to take care against envy, as though the spell could turn against the sorcerer. And it did! “I went to clean the paddock near the cemetery and a spirit came from there and attached itself to my back.” When this happened, he sought help from Umbanda¹⁸ in the Niterói neighborhood, in the city of Canoas, near Porto Alegre. LPM attributed his kidney problem to a malignant spirit from the cemetery where only Evangelical Lutherans are buried. In this case it is useless to bless oneself or appeal to Catholic saints or to the Virgin Mary, since some prayers are ended in the name of the Holy Trinity, while others are in the name of the Father, the Son and the Virgin Mary. Thus, from the point of view of those who seek a *benzedura*, they do not give up the public health system and a strong presence at the worship services. These are integrated systems and there is no abyss between them, as denounced by Boaventura de Sousa Santos regarding the monoculture of knowledge, a topic to which we shall return later on.

Bad luck at the company

I refer to one of the cases discussed in the inaugural lecture in 1996, to which I referred above. On that occasion I did an ethnography of the congregation where I worked as a pastor. Among the cases, I mentioned how difficult it was for the workers who had the night shift after the accidental death of the couple that pioneered the company and came from the interior of Rio Grande do Sul, bringing many Catholic and Lutheran farmers to work for them. The workers became qualified as the meat packing chamber company became a big company and even exported its products to other countries in Latin America. It became a company that sought German technology for its internationally renowned production. One decade ago it went bankrupt as the result of mismanagement, I presume, as happens with almost all family businesses.

The pioneering couple died in a car accident right after they handed over their business to the children. Surprisingly, they died under a meat packing chamber manufactured by their company. After their burial, strange things began happening on the night shift, besides labor accidents. Ghosts walked the corridors, machines began to work on their own, tools were dropped. In other words, amid all those advanced technologies imported from Germany, spirits wandered and spread fear. Therefore, it was decided to hold an ecumenical worship service. The company owners were Catholic and talked to the priest. Most of the middle employees were Lutheran, so the pastor was invited. The ecumenical service at the company, which used a truck body as the altar, aimed at exorcism. Peace returned and the service was repeated for decades on the day before Christmas¹⁹.

Andréas Reblin (Orgs.), 2008. p. 136. The Three Forquilhas Valley is one of the cradles of German colonization in Brazil. It is located on the north coast of Rio Grande Sul. The Imperial Government sent Evangelical Germans there in 1826. During this period Catholic immigrants were sent to what became São Pedro Colony.

¹⁸ Religion of African origin, but mostly practiced by urban whites, that syncretizes Catholic saints, spirits of black men and women and of indigenous people under the re-incarnationist force of Kardecist spiritualism. It is a religion with a strong presence in the city of São Leopoldo, with more than 500 temples.

¹⁹ BOBSIN, 1997, p. 273-276.

Both this case and the other one were first analyzed in the light of the novel by Jorge Amado, *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos* (“Dona Flor and her two husbands”). Vadinho, Dona Flor’s first husband, was a man who was not strongly committed to his wife. He was always partying with women, gambling, and spent the nights away from home. In our Pelé’s language, Vadinho’s life was also a “mess.” Even though he made Dona Flor suffer, she always took him back, forgave him, until the next night of partying, when his character as a womanizer, wastrel and also as a man who could move in the world of “law and order” became manifest. Since he was a godson of Exu he could open up any path closed by someone or by a spiritual force. He opened up Dona Flor’s heart with his rascally sweet-talk, and off they went for another night of vagrancy²⁰.

It happens that Vadinho died after a night of partying, very near home. But the physical death had to be completed by the ritual death. Meanwhile Dona Flor’s mourning and her reclusion were frequently disturbed by Vadinho’s apparition. Even after she married a pharmacist, with a methodical, rational life style, which was very different from Vadinho’s vagrancy, he returned to disturb the nights of love of Flor and Dr. Teodoro Madureira. Thus, Flor felt torn apart between two worlds, of which she was a mediator, a kind of Our Lady with two husbands. In order not to feel cynical, like Vadinho, she asked her friend Dionísia (not Apolónia) of Oxóssi to talk to father Didi, because it was necessary to perform an obligation, with a blood sacrifice, so that Vadinho would no longer return from the place where he was. And the sacrifice was performed. The blood was spilt. Vadinho gradually lost his material form as his godfather Exu was tied up in a spiritual war that owed nothing to the discourses of the churches of prosperity. Vadinho, then, died for the second time. Jorge Amado, a Communist and *ogán*, protector of the *terreiros* [Umbanda shrines], ends his novel thus:

And with this we come to the end of the tale of Dona Flor and her two husbands, set forth in all its details and mysteries, as clear and dark as life itself. All this took place in Bahia, where these and other acts of magic occur without startling anybody. If anyone has his doubts, let him ask Cardoso e Sa., and he will tell him whether or not it is the truth. He can be found on the planet Mars or on any poor corner of the city.²¹

Life is clear and dark, and these acts of magic occur on the corners at Faculdades EST, even if it is located in an upper-class neighborhood, but the place is full of students from lower income classes. Also in its corridors, when a fellow employee imposed her work on others, threatening to do some religious spell against them in order to harm the life of their family; fear, thus, made them vulnerable because those who were supposedly harmed by a spiritual entity shared the same life view and worldview as the one who got her colleagues to do her work. The answer to the problem in labor relations was not given at some religious place or in pastoral counseling, but rather by rescinding the contract according to the labor laws, a rescision performed by the administration. On the other hand, the temporary change of job was seen by a secretary as an answer to a promise made in her church. But the promise was cancelled functionally with a very technical note that did not take into account the underground of academic

²⁰ BOBSIN, 1997, p. 264.

²¹ AMADO, Jorge. *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, s.d., p. 535. [English version taken from <https://www.librarything.com/work/45483>].

life. In the words of Granny Tereza, in *Santo Forte*²², a documentary by Eduardo Coutinho, there was lack of clairvoyance in erudite work.

The final mention of the book by Jorge Amado inspired me to make a statement that really lacks much foundation—this is what I discover today, almost two decades after that inaugural lecture:

Nobody is suggesting a “Vadinian” or an extremely methodical theology such as the life of Dr. Teodoro Madureira, but rather a “Florian” one, which deals simultaneously with the rational and the mythical, the traditional and the modern, the existential and the liberating, the official and the clandestine, without forgetting the ambiguities of life so very present in religion.²³

2. Other forms of knowledge and colonial modernity

The management of religion seeking survival on the margins of institutional life, be it political, religious or social life, follows the perspective of complementarity, like those whose life is a “mess” like the lives of Pelé, Vadinho, our *benzedor* or Dona Flor in the threshold phase of her mourning. Reading religion as it has been read, from the sociological perspective, like I myself did, requires the deconstruction of an analytic legacy that polarizes the sacred and the profane, the popular and the erudite, the traditional and the modern, the subaltern and the dominant, black and white. Likewise, it is necessary to deconstruct theories that claim that the clergy monopolizes the assets of salvation, as in Bourdieu’s view following Max Weber, a thinking that may have influenced the assessment, for instance, that Droogers performed of Pomeranian religiosity in Espírito Santo. Pelé, LPM, Vadinho and Dona Flor at the threshold of mourning appropriated the official discourses without having the monopoly of those who represent the erudite modern world. See how Bourdieu, following Max Weber, interprets religious power:

As a result of the monopolization of the management of the goods of salvation by a body of religious specialists, socially recognized as exclusive holders of the specific competence necessary for the production or reproduction of a deliberately organized corpus of secret (and, therefore, rare) knowledge, the constitution of a religious field goes hand in hand with the objective disappropriation of those who are excluded and, for this reason, become laypersons ... deprived of religious capital ... and recognizing the legitimacy of this disappropriation due to the simple fact that as such they do not know.²⁴

We do not need to leave the modern world in its somewhat unorthodox Marxist interpretation to begin to deconstruct the sociological discourse, highly limited to the European Christian world,

²² A documentary by film-maker Eduardo Coutinho on the occasion of the visit of John Paul II to Brazil. Coutinho and his team went up a hill in a poor neighborhood of the city of Rio de Janeiro and interviewed people during the Pope’s stay in Brazil. Almost all of them said that they were Catholic because they had been baptized in the Catholic Church, but that they practiced other religions. The documentary shows the baptism of a child in an Afro-Brazilian worship place. That child had been baptized during a Catholic mass in the morning and was then baptized in a *terreiro* in the evening. The Catholic priest allowed people to use the water of baptism for the Umbanda ritual.

²³ BOBSIN, 1997, p. 279.

²⁴ BOURDIEU, Pierre. *A economia das trocas simbólicas*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1982. p. 39.

as in the case of Bourdieu, which acquired followers in Brazil. When Gramsci analyzed the Catholic Church, in an Italian prison, with access only to parish newsletters, he realized the following:

Every religion, even Catholicism ... is in reality a multiplicity of distinct and often contradictory religions: there is one Catholicism for the peasants, one for the petits-bourgeois and town workers, one for women, and one for intellectuals which is itself variegated and disconnected.²⁵

Advancing in the perspective of the deconstruction of intellectual modernity that is sometimes positivist functionalist and sees in religions of the people a moment to be overcome, or at other times in its Marxist or liberal version with secularizing trends, the “messy religion” points to the overcoming of dichotomies and survives at the edges without ignoring the institutions, which are appropriated in a logic of survival. No one better than Rubem Alves in his text “A ciranda dos Deuses ... entre a universidade e o povo” [The *ciranda* (Brazilian folk dance and song similar to ring-around-the-rosy) of Gods ... between the university and the people] to show the lack of interest of the Brazilian university, which was born in the last century, for the study of religious phenomena fated to succumb with the advance of the modern world or to be ignored in their exoticism. Protestantism also did not take much interest in the popular religions²⁶. When I began to research Pentecostalism in Brazil in 1982, it was already in its 7th decade and only three academic texts raised it out of invisibility. Returning as a conclusion to Alves, as regards a change in the 1960s the author claims that

Behind this new construction of the object “popular religiosity,” however, are several prior ideological and political alterations: the collapse of developmentalism, the Church’s loss of its privileged position with the owners of power, the discovery of the political potential of popular culture in the beginning of the 1960s.²⁷

Post-abyssal thinking

After bringing back “popular religiosity,” let us analyze the subject under the look in which we find it, as put by Westhelle, not inscribed in the picture, but in the frame. Tracing his text “Outros saberes,” we go directly to the question asked under the topic *Saberes subjugados* [Subjugated forms of knowledge], which, in my opinion, is distant from the classic sociological perceptions of religions, which are usually oriented to the external aspects of the phenomenon of religion. Also theology needs to live in the frame to overcome the rationality that makes it self-referential, taking from itself the possibility of looking for loyal allies²⁸, as stated by Westhelle, or, perhaps, lethal allies:

²⁵ GRAMSCI, Antonio. *Concepção dialética da história*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1984. p. 44. [English version taken from George Hoare and Nathan Sperber. *An Introduction to Antonio Gramsci: His Life, Thought and Legacy*. Bloomsbury, 2015. Retrieved through <https://books.google.com.br/books?isbn=1472572793>].

²⁶ ALVES, Rubem. *O suspiro dos oprimidos*. São Paulo: Paulinas, 1984. p. 116-131.

²⁷ ALVES, 1984. p. 139.

²⁸ WESTHELLE, Vitor. Outros saberes. Teologia e ciência na modernidade. *Estudos Teológicos*, 35/3, p. 258-278, 1995. p. 266.

As we saw, in sciences the paradox is always dissimulated. Theology, on the other hand, is a form of knowing that presupposes the paradox and tries to render it explicit. It is in this sense, on the very surface of the representational practice itself, that theology functions differently from the practice of scientific inscription.²⁹

Let us set aside Westhelle's dense argumentations about Foucault, who attributed to theology the position of anti-science, and go to the end of his text where he allows us to establish a relationship with the first part of our study, when he asks theology "whether it can embrace instead of avoid its own critical situation and, in doing so, be able to recover local forms of knowledge incorporated into myths, rituals and practices that reveal the fragility of systems and institutions."³⁰ Thus theology, as a transgressive form of knowledge, sustained on its discourse about God as the "Other-discourse", creates rifts in the obscure limits of the scientific discourse itself³¹.

Returning to our impertinence regarding popular knowledge, the "messy" discourse of the characters in the ethnographic part of the text above cannot be considered merely subaltern or deprived of the powers of modernity; might they not be partners of theology in broadening the obscure rifts of the dominant system?

This position, which is not guided by linearity and dualisms, but by the laughter of Georges Bataille that moves us to the edges of the frames or to the obscure rifts of those who read an older text than that of science³², places us in the company of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who seeks to overcome the abyssal condition of knowledge delimited by the monoculture of knowledge that produces the non-existence of those who do not think within the official form of knowledge. The instigating text talks about modern thinking, seen as abyssal, because it creates invisible global lines. Also considered abyssal are the hierarchies between the monoculture of knowledge and external forms of knowledge, which are called ignorant. On the other hand, in post-abyssal thinking the invisible line disappears and places knowledge and ignorance on the same side³³. Hence, our study is interested in seeing how the abyssal lines deal with the religious phenomenon:

The same abyssal cartography is a constitutive part of modern knowledge. Once again the colonial area is, par excellence, the universe of incomprehensible beliefs and behaviors that in no way can be considered knowledge and are, therefore, beyond the true and the false. The other side of the line hosts only incomprehensible, magical and idolatrous practices. The complete strangeness of such practices led to the very denial of the human nature of their agents.³⁴

Abyssal thinking becomes more comprehensible when Santos recalls the question: do Native Americans have a soul – *anima nullius*? Native Americans are said to be in a savage state, and the colonial territory is seen as a counterpoint to the metropolises. According to Santos, the first condition for post-abyssal thinking involves the idea of co-presence: "Radical co-presence

²⁹ WESTHELLE, 1995, p. 268.

³⁰ WESTHELLE, 1995, p. 276.

³¹ WESTHELLE, 1995, p. 276.

³² WESTHELLE, 1995, p. 266 e 271.

³³ SANTOS, Boaventura de Sousa. Para além do pensamento abissal. Das linhas globais a uma ecologia de saberes. *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, 78, p. 3-37, outubro de 2007. p. 5.

³⁴ SANTOS, 2007, p. 8.

means that the practices and agents of both sides of the line are contemporary in egalitarian terms.”³⁵ The indigenous peoples would be the paradigm of post-abyssal thinking, marked by the overcoming of linear time.

Persistence of traditional religion/anthropophagy

Thus, in the recent search for theoretical contributions to reassess my texts on the religious underground of the ecclesial world still marked by abyssal thinking, I began to find, with the help of colleagues and students, texts that I only discuss briefly, trying to unveil a new field of research in readings on post-colonial theories, but “old” because of intuitions that are still under the yoke of abyssal thinking. These are the first steps of my own theoretical deconstruction. With this obscure itinerary, one could invert Guimarães Rosa: the light side only becomes dark slowly, since we are interested in seeing coloniality as the other side of the modern world. It is in this search that I found an instigating text by an African, published in the collection sponsored by UNESCO and by the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC).

Analyzing the expansion of Christianity and Islam in Africa, the author of the article “Religion and social evolution,” Tshishiku Tshibangu, does not deny the contribution of these religions in the field of education and health, even though the former was associated with the colonialist project, which generated mistrust in Islam. In other words, Islam and traditional African religion looked mistrustfully on the colonization project imposed by Europe because “Christianity had grown up in close collaboration with colonialism while Islam and traditional religion were more distant and sometimes hostile.”³⁶

Among many questions raised by Tshibangu, I highlight what interests us at this time, especially about Christianity, decolonization and the persistence of traditional religion, despite the proselytism of Christianity. According to the African thinker,

For many Christians and Muslims, the basis of moral values still derives more from the old cosmology than from the new beliefs: there is still respect for ancestors as in the pouring of libations, belief in the continuing involvement of ancestors in the life of their successors, belief in the forces of good and evil which can be manipulated by direct access to the divinities through prayer and sacrifice, belief in the efficacy of charms and amulets to ward off evil, and so on. Belief in spirits and witches in social relationships remains a major factor beyond the avowed adherents of traditional religion.³⁷

Thus, what Tshibangu says, in collaboration with J. F. Ade Ajayi and Lemin Sanneh, is perfectly applicable in Brazil, and especially at Morro do Espelho, as regards the *benzeduras* done by the mother of Claudio Soares, known as Pelé. Catholics, Lutherans and faithful of other traditional churches, recognized for talking against the popular religious practices, such as *benzedura* and faith healing, have a faith characterized by the co-presence of systems that

³⁵ SANTOS, 2007, p. 23.

³⁶ TSHIBANGU, Tshishiku. “Religião e evolução social”. In: *História Geral da África. África desde 1935*. Brasília: MEC; UNESCO, 2010, vol. VIII, p. 613. [English version available at https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/file%20uploads%20/general_history_africa_viii.pdf. English version: p. 507].

³⁷ TSHIBANGU, 2010, p. 609-610 [English version: p. 505].

are not complementary only for those who fight them or for official medicine. Hence, both in Africa and among the Capixaba Pomeranian Lutherans, people often seek popular medicine. As to traditional African religion, “There is a vast area of African life which both Islam and Christianity have invaded but have not succeeded in completely displacing. This is the area of health and healing,”³⁸ according to Tshibangu.

André Droogers’ analysis of attitudes among pastors about popular medicine among the Capixaba Pomeranians, which ranges from denial of the activities of *benzedores* and greater tolerance among young Brazilian pastors, can be clearly shown in his comment in the chapter on *benzedura*:

A 76yr old woman told of a pastor who had an illness that affected his fingers. The *benzedeira* offered to bless them, but he refused saying that she could not perform witchcraft (*hexerei*) on him. She did it all the same, and he was soon cured. However, in his sermons he railed against *benzedura*. What the woman said then was *Het darüber geschimpf, wenn der auch na löft het* (He criticized it although he believed).³⁹

While the pastor follows his abyssal line, sustaining his discourse in the logic of religious power, the *benzedora*, as a member of the church of the pastor that questions her, says her prayers including him in them and attributes the cure to them. Differently from the pastor cured “against his will,” the considerations of Tshibangu about the persistence of traditional African religion show us that although Christianity performed proselytism, it was absorbed as a foreign element that expanded the local tradition. On the contrary of what we were led to think, it was the local religion that was potentiated by the colonizer’s religion. However, the traditional roots became subaltern, even if the hunter became the hunted and the missionary the missionaree. The anthropophagic power appears to be in the local religion.

I performed a similar analysis to this one in the text that I called “A morte morena do protestantismo branco. Contrabandos de espíritos nas fronteiras religiosas”⁴⁰ [The brown death of white Protestantism. Smuggling spirits on the religious frontiers]. The topic involves an analysis of the discourse that demonizes African religions by the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus [Universal Church of the Kingdom of God] and other fundamentalist Protestant tendencies spread throughout most of the churches. On denying the wizard, the pastor becomes one of them. In other words, the demonized religion expanded in the language of those who condemn it, at the same time offering symbolic resistance, but not sufficient to subvert any order of domination. The symbolic-religious revanche of the subaltern is limited to preserving minimum spaces of dignity, more as resistance against than as an overcoming of the dominant colonizing order.

The ambiguity of the symbolic revanche is still a will captive to the religion of the dominators. The apparition of the Virgin of Guadeloupe, for instance, to the Native American Juan Diego, who was already christianized in 1531, ten years after the conquest of Tenochtitlán in Mexico, is an exemplary mythical story. The Virgin sends the Native American to convince the archbishop to build a sanctuary in Tepeyac. Since the archbishop of Mexico is against the idea,

³⁸ TSHIBANGU, 2010, p. 610 [English version: p. 505].

³⁹ DROOGERS, 1984, p. 68.

⁴⁰ BOBSIN, Oneide. “A morte morena do protestantismo branco. Contrabando de Espíritos nas fronteiras religiosas”. In: *Correntes religiosas e globalização*. São Leopoldo: PPL/CEBI/IEPG, 2002. p. 39-63. This text was previously published in *Estudos Teológicos*, 40/2, p. 21-39, 2000.

a miracle occurs. When Juan Diego opens his mantle in which he carried roses for the church official, an image of the Virgin appears instead of them. Then the bishop orders a Christian sanctuary to be built. Since the mother of God appears in Tepeyac, a former Aztec sanctuary where Tonantzin, goddess of fertility, was worshiped, the sanctuary of the colonizer will be built there, which may appear to be “a satanic trick to mask idolatry.”⁴¹

Five centuries later, something similar is still heard from the mouth of leaders of African religions in the Northeast of Brazil: “O branco faz a letra, o negro faz a treta” [The white man writes, the black man tricks]. Symbolic-religious subversion, in itself, appears to be caught in a captive will determined by the colonizer’s religion.

This is shown by the construction of a sanctuary in a “pagan” space after the miracle, which seems rather more like a satanic trick, typical of post-abyssal knowledge. But the violence of the conquest is submerged in the process, as ignored by Mircea Eliade, a thinker who is behind the theoreticians of Brazilian religious education. Brazil and America appear in his work in the logic of abyssal thinking. According to Mircea Eliade,

The Spanish and Portuguese conquistadores, discovering and conquering territories, took possession of them in the name of Jesus Christ. The raising of the Cross was equivalent to consecrating the country, hence in some sort to a “new birth.” For through Christ “old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (II Corinthians, 5, 17). The newly discovered country was “renewed,” “recreated” by the Cross.⁴²

Next to last blanks

Searching for new theoretical contributions to understand the “syncretic popular religiosity” in the everyday life of Evangelical Lutheran people or in the spaces where they act, as I said above, I had a late encounter with thinkers whose theories I do not know much about, although in my texts there were already contributions of such theories. As I have insisted, it is prudent to move from the diffuse reality to the concept, affirming, together with Otto, that the irrational is not equivalent to the unreasonable, but to the incapacity of concepts to grasp the divine, the unnameable, that which cannot be derived from experience and, from the point of view of our confession, is “extra nos.” In this recent path I have encountered theoreticians who can, together with others, overcome the abyssal thinking by analyzing coloniality as the other side of modernity, which is not post-modern. Still with shallow dives into turbid waters, I remember the Argentinian, Walter Mignolo with his *Histórias locais/Projetos globais. Colonialidade, saberes subalternos e pensamento limiar* [Local stories/Global projects. Coloniality, subaltern knowledge and threshold thinking], through which I returned to Darcy Ribeiro, whom many ignore because he was a militant anthropologist. What Mignolo says about anthropology could be important for theology:

⁴¹ PARKER, Cristian. *Otra lógica en América Latina*. Religión popular y modernización capitalista. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993. p. 34.

⁴² ELIADE, Mircea. *O sagrado e o profano*. A essência das religiões. Lisboa: Edição Livros do Brasil, s. d. p. 46. [English version: *The Sacred and the Profane*. The Nature of Religion. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963. p. 32].

The word *antropologiano* [“anthropologian”] actually constituted a marker of the subalternization of knowledge: a Third World anthropologist (Darcy Ribeiro wrote at the end of the 1960s and amid the Cold War and the consolidation of the studies in the field) is not the same as a First World anthropologist, since the former is in the place of the object, not the subject of the study.⁴³

The mention of the blanks would remain incomplete if I did not point to the need to deepen the reading of Luther’s writing *De Servo Arbitrio* [On the bondage of the will], a reference text that gave rise to the work of Rudolf Otto, *The Holy*, and that deserves much attention, despite my suspicion that there are evolutionary residues that led Otto to show that a wrathful God is at the origin of the Holy, when it manifests itself through awe and fear. Is there any young Evangelical Lutheran who does not remember the question: *What does this mean?* and the answer that followed in Luther’s *Small Catechism*, which begins with the words: *We should fear and love God...* It will also be necessary to further look at how much the irrational can be equivalent to the post-abysal thinking of the other side of modernity. Besides, in our “popular religiosity” a god who causes fear and awe, who swallows evil people, does not have much chance of being accepted. Pelé, Vadinho, Dona Flor and the *benzedor* from the place I come from see the deity as a “great friend,” who can be convinced ritually to do the rather double-dealing will of humans, especially of men. These characters whose lives are a “mess” move between sacred and sacrilegious with an “illusive difference, but not alterity,”⁴⁴ contrasting with what Luther says through Otto:

The passages relevant in this connection from Luther’s *De Servo Arbitrio* are cited often enough: but to understand the well-nigh daemonic character of this numinous feeling the reader should particularly note the effect of the following passage from Luther’s sermon on Exodus xx. The preacher leaves no means untried to bring out effectively the element of numinous horror in his text: Yea, for the world it seemeth as though God were a mere silly yawner, with mouth ever agape, or a cuckold, who lets another lie with his wife and feigneth that he sees it not. But He assaileth a man, and hath such a delight therein that He is of His jealousy and wrath impelled to consume the wicked. Then shall we learn how that God is a consuming fire.⁴⁵

In this text, therefore, it is still necessary to look further at Luther and Otto, as suggested by Hans-Jürgen Prien in the prologue of his *História do cristianismo na América Latina* [History of Christianity in Latin America]:

If the deity is impalpable and also incomprehensible according to the Maya, one might see in it a parallel with Luther’s statement that God acts always in worldly history hidden behind grimaces and masks, or with Otto’s recognition that the numinous, the holy, the divine is always “the totally other,” *Mysterium tremendum*, that we encounter again in all religions in

⁴³ MIGNOLO, Walter. *Histórias locais/Projetos globais*. Colonialidade, saberes subalternos e pensamento liminar. São Paulo: Humanitas, s.d. p. 35.

⁴⁴ WESTHELLE, Vitor. A festa, o lúdico e o erótico na religião. Perspectiva teológica. *Estudos de Religião*, XIX/17, p. 12-28, June 2005. p. 17. In this text the author analyzes the translation of Exodus 33:22-23 in the German Bible by Luther that shows a deity that is seen from behind, that is from the butt, never letting a human being see its face.

⁴⁵ *Apud* OTTO, 2007. p. 136. [English version: p. 102].

certain archetypes and whose superior and incomprehensible reality has its prelude in myth, to say it with Karl Kerényi.⁴⁶

Even taking the paths of doubt, I dare say that the local stories can oppose the hegemonic metadiscourses, as they are rendered explicit in myths through the simultaneity of the intuitive and the rational. The unnameable is present through its absence and *sub contrario* in the colonial project as signs of grace covered by darkness, because the power of naming is broken when it expresses itself as “*I am who I am or will be*,” according to Exodus 3:14.

Thus, with this concern, the words of Guimarães Rosa help us understand, in the twilight, the “messy” discourse:

People came from hell—all of us—so says my compadre Quelemém. From some lower depths so monstrous-terrifying that Christ himself was able, thanks only to his radiant strength, to descend for a quick glance, in the darkness of the eve of the Third Day. Do you believe it? That in that place the normal pleasure of each one is to abuse and torment the others; that the heat and cold afflict them sorely; and in order to digest what they eat, they have to strain in the middle, with awful pangs; even to breathe hurts; and there is no rest. Do I believe it? It’s hard to say. I think back on the campaign of Macaúba da Jaúba, what I saw for myself and what I heard; and other things—the atrocities which they committed as a matter of course in so many little settlements: shooting, stabbing, gutting, putting out eyes, cutting off tongues and ears, not even sparing little children, firing on the innocent cattle, burning persons still half alive in a welter of blood. Did not such things come from hell? Of course. It is plain to see that they came up from there ahead of their time, to punish the others, as a reminder to us never to forget what is raging down there. Nevertheless, many persons land down there with a crash, as soon as they die. Living is a very dangerous business.⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ PRIEN, Hans-Jürgen. *La historia del cristianismo en América Latina*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal; Salamanca: Sígueme, 1985. p. 52.

⁴⁷ ROSA, João Guimarães. *Grande sertão: veredas*. 12th ed. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1978. p. 40. [English version: *The devil to pay in the backlands*. Transl. by James L. Taylor and Harriet de Onís. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963. p. 39].

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