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# **“RACING” RELIGION: Reflections on Afro-Brazilian Religion and Globalization**

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Anthony B. Pinn

Gods ought to exude out of the pores like sweat. They had to well up from the inside. They could not be borrowed from others or imposed by others. Such gods were no good at all. They had no magic, no potency. Borrowed gods erased the soul and left you nothing you could call your own. It was the most terrible form of robbery.<sup>1</sup>

The above quotation points to the manner in which religious systems develop in response to sociopolitical, economic, and spiritual questions. Many of these questions arise out of contact with the “Other” in ways that bring into question basic “sacred” and mundane assumptions. Religion and its language (theology) understood in these pragmatic terms interest me. Much of my research has involved the exploration of this formulation of religion as it revolves around the theological issue of “theodicy”: What can be said about God and godliness in light of human suffering? How should humans conduct themselves in light of this?<sup>2</sup> Responses to these questions provided within the “Black Atlantic” show numerous and profound similarities. I am convinced that these general patterns of continuity result from the common patterns of contact and conquest giving socioeconomic and political shape to this area of the world. This is my current thesis. And although defensible at this point, a sustainable argument concerning these similarities necessitates additional research.

The Faculty Development International Seminar provided an opportunity to extend my research to Afro-Brazilian religious traditions that, in many ways, exemplify cultural contact within the Americas. My effort to contextualize Brazilian religions was greatly enhanced by the presence of colleagues from other areas of study who helped me approach my questions highly sensitized to a much larger intellectual context. The implications of

this for my understanding of disciplines and intellectual terrains is noteworthy but beyond the scope of this essay. My current task is to share some of my findings and insights on the nature and function of Afro-Brazilian religions, particularly *Candomblé*. My thoughts are divided into three categories: (1) personal reflections on the trip and the rhetoric of *democracia racial* (racial democracy); (2) research findings on *Candomblé* and its praxis of resistance; and (3) pedagogical considerations and notes on globalization.

## I. Race and Religion

Brazil is a rich country—large, complex, and promising. Yet the country's collective memory is scarred by past repressive political structures and tremendous inflation. A new political order is in place and the economic situation looks promising. Yet, for many, caution and critical reflection are still necessary due to large pockets of urban poverty referred to as *favelas* (slums) and the informal drug economy. What I found interesting about political and economic conversations of this nature was the understated relationship between race and class.

Many of the academics I spoke with gave little attention to the relationship between economic and political transformation and racism, although many hinted at the political nature of Afro-Brazilian culture.<sup>3</sup> It appears that race (xenophobia?) has become a hidden discourse through the rhetoric of *democracia racial*. The logic behind such a denial runs this way: racism is associated, in the Brazilian mind, with physical segregation as exemplified by the United States. Without this type of segregation currently present, Brazilians often overlook the presence of harmful racial attitudes. Outside the academy, popular cultural expression marks a different type of conversation, a conversation suggesting another approach to racial hierarchies. For example, in the *favelas*, Afro-Brazilian culture and expression are embraced, enacted, and, according to many, used as a form of sociopolitical resistance. *Candomblé* is paradigmatic of this cultural resistance. My goal was to begin exploring the nature of *Candomblé* as resistance and, in this way, gain an understanding of its theological and physical structure and rationale.

## II. Afro-Brazilian Religion and Resistance, or “Racing” Religion

As is the case with other American traditions, *Candomblé*'s doctrine and ritual activity vary from one location to the next. However, there are two forms of space that remain relatively consistent—the layout of the *terreiro* (*Candomblé* houses) and the cosmological structure of the religion. Through my independent research project, I made initial inquiries into these forms of space.

The periodic persecution of those committed to *Candomblé* and the attempt, as some scholars have put it, to “whiten” African culture in Brazil points to a liberative potential within the tradition.<sup>4</sup> Yet the manner in which *Candomblé* speaks to the “revolutionary” impulse is not unique.<sup>5</sup> One need only look to Haiti and the role of *Vodun* (petro cults) in the Haitian Revolution for the paradigmatic example of this. In addition, the persecution of *santería* believers in Cuba also points to the liberative potential held by other Afro-American religious traditions. What is, however, rather unique about *Candomblé* is the apparent strength of its doctrinal and ritual ties to African tradition. This is often discussed in terms of the tradition's high level of “orthodoxy.”

*Candomblé*, as opposed to the rural and loose worship of African gods, first developed in northeastern Brazil among African slaves and their descendants. Efforts by the Catholic Church to convert Blacks simply resulted in a stronger sense of African identification as slaves subdivided into “nações” or “nations”: Ketu, Jeje, Jeje-Nagô, Angola, or Congo. These nations gave shape to syncretistic practices, combining African practices and Catholicism, called *Candomblé*.<sup>6</sup> Although the term was first used to refer to a dance done by Blacks, some scholars argue that the first visible signs of *Candomblé* surfaced as early as the 1750s, and *terreiros* were present by 1830. It is likely that the oldest house was established in Salvador, Bahia, and was headed by “Aninha.”<sup>7</sup> With time the tradition was altered to meet the demands of a changing context.

The physical structure of the *terreiros* underwent undesired alterations. *Candomblé* houses, like Christian churches, do not hold deeds to their land and, as a result, the movement of home-

less Brazilians and governmental land needs have resulted in restricted space that is not in keeping with the African ideal.<sup>8</sup> Traditionally, the compound is composed of a house for the religious leader (*pai-de-santo* for male leaders or *mãe-de-santo* for female leaders); a public building in which public rituals take place (*barracão*); houses for the various deities (*orixás*) recognized by the community; a house for the ancestors; a house for those being initiated (*roncô*); and a space for animals. These areas are considered urban because they are constructed by humans. In addition, there is the rural or forest space housing the herbs and plants used for medical and ritual treatments. In recent years this layout has been, in most cases, reduced to a living space for the leader; a small space for herbs and plants; a small space for ancestors; and a large public space for rituals, off of which are small spaces (if possible) for the various *orixás*. If this space is unavailable, corners of the large public space are devoted to particular *orixás*.

It is possible to consider the establishment of this ritual space an act of defiance because it speaks to a connection with the earth that counters modern notions of progress and technological advances that downplay the importance of people and land. Anthropologist and *babalorixá* (healer/leader) Júlio Braga makes this argument using the 1930s wave of persecution of Afro-Brazilian religious rituals as proof. During this period religious leaders were arrested and beaten, and sacred items were confiscated and destroyed. In response to this state action, *terreiros* were moved to rural and undeveloped areas outside Salvador. Braga asserts that the movement pattern of *terreiros* foreshadowed the movement pattern of the city and maintained the humanness of believers.

Connected to the physical structure of the *Candomblé* house is the hierarchical layout of the tradition.<sup>9</sup> Positions within the practice are based upon mastery over various levels of ritual and theological knowledge—the likes/dislikes of the *orixás*, the uses of herbs and plants, the nature of the universe, etc. The first demarcation, however, is initiated vs. non-initiated participants and observers.<sup>10</sup> However, both parties share a desire to ensure the flow of cosmic energy — *axé* — through the community, because it is this energy that determines the welfare of the com-

munity and those it touches. This concern is acted out in ways that mirror levels of knowledge and expertise.

The leader/healer is the head of the *terreiro* and is selected due to his/her knowledge of the tradition and seniority. Following this leader are the other priestesses and priests who assume status based upon their number of years within the tradition. (Historically, women have dominated the leadership ranks.) Also of importance are the *ogãs*, the male members of social status and community importance who provide for the maintenance of the house through their financial and physical support, and through their status within the larger community. Occasional participants, clients, and the curious make up the remaining persons present during any given ceremony. In fact, during the ceremony I attended in Salvador, tourists and other curious spectators made up the majority of the audience.

The universe is also based upon an unalterable hierarchy. Of primary importance are the *orixás* who provide for the needs of devotees and clients. The origin of these deities is usually depicted in one of the following ways: (1) as natural forces personified; or (2) as those with extraordinary accomplishments who, upon death, become divine beings. Regardless of their origin, *orixás* receive the attention of the devout and are remembered with respect to their likes/dislikes, favorite foods and colors, and characteristics. They also possess devotees and in this form grant requests and reprimand those who have failed to fulfill responsibilities. Besides renewal by way of contact with the possessed, believers maintain a balanced life through sacrifice rituals (*ebós*) and consultation with an *orixá* through oracles (*búzios*).

Table of Select *Orixás*

Exú	The trickster deity, often associated with the "devil"
Oxossi	Deity associated with hunting
Ogum	The warrior deity
Yemanjá	Deity associated with motherhood and the ocean
Oxum	Deity associated with sensuality
Xangô	Deity associated with thunder
Oxalá	Deity associated with wisdom and creation

The ancestors, *egun*, also exercise importance through their ability to cause good or harm to the living members of their families. As a result, they must be remembered and cared for in order to ensure a healthy existence. After all, ancestors in the cosmic hierarchy are living humans who have a responsibility to maintain the flow of cosmic energy by “feeding” the ancestors and *orixás*, who, in turn, provide needed support. Much of this feeding takes the form of blood sacrifice. Blood, according to *Candomblé*, is the best representation of *axé*, and in addition to animal blood this tradition also recognizes several other types of blood—dark and white. The former is the material from certain plants and the latter includes semen and saliva. The plants, herbs, and animal life that assist in the maintenance of life’s delicate balance are positioned below humans in the cosmological structure of the universe. Inanimate objects follow.

This cosmology also represents a form of “soft” resistance in that it affirms the essential worth of humans and all forms of existence. Each participates in the vital flow of life and all must be appreciated. Racism is implicitly rejected because it perverts and prevents this proper flow of life forces by reducing certain humans to lower cosmological positions than they should hold. The harmonious interaction between these two forms of space—physical/ritual and cosmological—allows believers to live in spite of hardships and difficulties.

Rituals and ceremonies are complex enough for regular participants; hence, it is extremely difficult to gather an understanding of their meaning and content within the limited time of three weeks. I did, in the company of a few colleagues, attend a ceremony for Ogum late one evening at the oldest *terreiro* in Salvador. The initial several hours of the ceremony included greetings as the priestesses danced in accordance with the drums and songs. This took place as special guests, including leaders of other houses, and the leader of this community remained seated. During the final stages of this segment, several priestesses were possessed and removed from the room, presumably to put on the attire of the possessing *orixá*. One man became possessed by Ogum and was eventually led out of the room. He returned in the garb of the deity and continued to dance.

Possession is vital because it is through this divine presence that healing, help, and harmony are restored to the community. Those in need are able to address their request directly to the god associated with the item they need. *Axé* flows through these encounters and the community is balanced as a result. On another level and according to key figures such as Professor Braga, this encounter with the divine is also resistance in that it affirms a sense of human worth. That is to say, regardless of what the larger society projects with respect to them, devotees recognize their worth because of their intimate connection with cosmic forces. Hence what is best about the universe is reflected in their very being. Possession continuously restores a measure of hope and potentiality that life in the *favelas* and interaction with the dominant culture seeks to suffocate if not eradicate.

Unfortunately, *Candomblé's* struggle is not only with governmental structures. Other religious organizations have also attempted to undermine its relevancy to Brazilian life. Some have recognized this problem and continue to address and attempt to resolve the tension. Organizations such as KOINONIA, through direct action and materials such as the *Presence & Service* newsletter and several other publications, seek to educate concerning the nature and importance of Afro-Brazilian religious traditions. For example, the Estacio de Lima Museum in Salvador — the Police Museum — displays ritual objects taken by the police in the early twentieth century and displays them “alongside of aberrations of the world of crime and of nature.” KOINONIA attempts to correct such misrepresentations of *Candomblé* by facilitating conversation between practitioners and other members of the Salvador community.<sup>11</sup>

What I found even more troubling than this overt disrespect for Afro-Brazilian religion is the covert commercialization and exoticization of these traditions. For example, a restaurant currently housed at the former slave port in Salvador, which entertains customers with Afro-Brazilian performances, provides no information on the initial use of the building during the slave trade. In addition, *Candomblé*, *Capoeira*, and other forms of Afro-Brazilian culture are paraded on stage without context or meaning. This may titillate guests, but do they leave with any sense of the cultural importance of the dances, music, and rituals they glimpse? It is highly unlikely. When this is combined with the



historical significance of Bahia in the gathering of anthropological information on African-Americans, the seriousness of this religio-cultural insensitivity is brought into sharp relief.<sup>12</sup>

Cultural-religious realities allowing a despised and oppressed group to survive are forms of resistance, resistance through a flexive (presented as syncretistic) and eclectic response to (post)modernity. However, this form of resistance, although vital, is more passive. This comment is not intended to downplay the importance of survival, nor am I placing value judgments on the praxis of this tradition. Survival is an existential necessity; who could deny this? However, the questions, from my perspective, are these: Are there proactive mechanisms in *Candomblé* that promote more than survival by seeking to precipitate social transformation? How does *Candomblé* alter the socioeconomic and political reality of believers? I acknowledge that these questions are sparked by my own context of liberative activity in the United States, generated by religiously inspired organizations such as the Civil Rights Movement. However, this contextual confession does not render these questions unimportant. Similarities between religious practices, particularly African/American traditions, should foster comparisons that include mention of the above questions.

When responding to these questions, those I talked with often became defensive and spoke about resistance in very vague terms, arguing at times that the tradition's priority is not social service work but spiritual renewal. Even if concrete actions extending beyond individual *terreiros* are difficult to pinpoint, the potential for such mass action is certainly not missing. The "Black Movement," a Black-consciousness movement, mentioned in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador, has grown to appreciate this potential.<sup>13</sup> Yet it rejected Afro-Brazilian religions during its initial phases of development because it saw very little revolutionary potential in "otherworldly" traditions. However, with time, Afro-Brazilian religions were appreciated for their strong African retentions. They were then understood as exemplars of the cultural consciousness Black Brazilians needed in order to challenge their socioeconomic condition. Yet members of the Black Movement only rarely participated in rituals and ceremonies. This has changed in recent years with more individuals belonging to the Black Movement actively partici-

pating in *Candomblé*. Furthermore, increased communication between Brazil's Black Movement and African-Americans in the United States is shedding light on the usefulness of the U.S. Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement as models of Black consciousness. One of the difficulties, I think, faced by the Black Movement is the manner in which racial identity in Brazil establishes racial democracy apart from an appreciation for sub-group identifications.<sup>14</sup> Even a growing critique of racial democracy within the Black Movement will only promote a revised sense of Black ontology. This is certainly vital, but it does not necessarily translate, from my perspective, into structural changes. With all of this said, I think the answers to my questions rest in the activation of a politicized Black identity. Livio Sansone hints at this: "We suggest that black culture, and many other ethnic (sub)cultures, should be considered part and parcel of popular culture, and that black identity can be one of the possible languages of popular culture, and can be one way of using elements of popular culture politically."<sup>15</sup>

### III. Pedagogical Considerations: Wrestling with Religion

My understanding of the religious landscape of Brazil is more complex and refined as a result of the Faculty Development International Seminar. And this information will alter my sense of pedagogy and my teaching philosophy. For example, the intimate connection between socioeconomic structures, political ideologies, and religiosity, while extremely strong, is often underappreciated. So, in order to teach religions that develop out of a "context of contact" and conquest, it is vital to present them within their larger "secular" context. Religious answers always assume "worldly" problems.

The globalization of African religious practices beyond first contact through the "middle passage" is occurring because practitioners from Brazil, for example, continue to maintain contact with Africa. Furthermore, the de-Brazilianizing of *Candomblé* is occurring in South America through the spreading of the tradition into countries such as Argentina and Venezuela.<sup>16</sup> And, renewed interest in African culture and African religion in U.S. African-American communities results in frequent visitations to Bahia and the movement of Afro-Brazilian religious ritual and

theology into U.S. urban centers. This, of course, results in a continual circulation of information and practices; at its best, this entails intellectual and cultural enrichment and exchange. At its worst, important traditions are romanticized and exoticized. Avoiding the latter is a major concern, and this also involves approaching other contexts with sensitivity and respect.

The religiously defined world is in fact a small space. There are commonalities between various religious traditions, regardless of geography, because of the ways in which contact and conquest defy time and space. As a theologian, this recognition requires a redefining of my goals and objectives in ways that further my ability to bracket personal opinion and beliefs in order to appreciate and understand the religious perspective of others. The notion of life as *weblike* takes on new meaning, and the importance of phenomenology and pragmatism as methodological approaches is renewed.

With this in mind, my "African-American Religions" course will undergo several changes. This course exposes students to the various forms of religious expression within African-American communities, focusing on the United States. Last summer's work in Brazil will help to better define the larger religious context of the Americas by demonstrating similarities in ritual and theology between African-based traditions in the United States and *Candomblé* in Brazil. For example, the nature and function of possession by an *orixá* is similar in both locations, and the purpose of ritual contact with the deities is also similar. Strengthening the comparative component of this course is of fundamental importance, particularly in light of the large number of students who enter my classroom having experienced both contexts.

Conversations mentioned above will also help me better bracket my own assumptions concerning the direct impact of race and racism on religious formulations. My working assumption has been that traditions forged in a context of contact and conquest are by nature heavily influenced by these factors. And this has been an underlying philosophical assumption within my teaching of African-American religious traditions. But when I teach this course again, I will need to problematize this position by demonstrating the alternate perspective voiced by many in Brazil (and elsewhere in the Caribbean): class supersedes race. My pragmatic leanings necessitate a willingness to recog-

nize the feasibility of alternate perspectives on the “racing” of religion; and this material should be present on my syllabus. In addition to altering the way I conceive of and teach religion in the Americas, new pedagogical considerations for me will also include reflections on U.S. religious practices by those outside of the North American context. That is to say, I think my students (and I) will learn a great deal about religion in North America by taking seriously both “insider” and “outsider” perspectives. Putting John Mason in conversation with Júlio Braga is an example of how I plan on accomplishing the “insider”/“outsider” tension.<sup>17</sup>

These are some initial course-related thoughts, and time will undoubtedly result in alterations. Yet I hope the joy and challenge of exploring ideas through open questioning and conversation will remain intact because this is one of higher education’s greatest rewards.

With the above in mind, globalization comes to involve contact, exposure, appreciation, and conversation. It is more than a gathering of differences; at its best it is a profound rethinking of community and the nature of connections, based upon hard questioning and truthful answers. It, in essence, entails the process of meaning-making extending beyond one’s boundaries. Along this line, religion becomes a language cutting across cultural markers and terrains (but without becoming universal).

Globalization, however, has not always been a blessing; take, for example, the globalization process created by the slave trade and the “middle passage.” The cultural production resulting from this process is positive as it shows the creativity and sophistication of Native Americans and Africans. But the economically driven modern period marked by this movement across the water is far from glorious. The understanding of globalization presented to students should include both the pitfalls and the positive developments.

The challenge is to avoid the pitfalls of globalization and to share insights with students who are, for the most part, confined to a classroom and depend upon readings, photos, and videos to get a feel for the religious sensibilities of others. For me, sharing the sounds, smells, and sensations of Afro-Brazilian and other American traditions is difficult in such a “sterile” environment. The crux of the issue is this: to display the excitement of connect-

ing with and showing healthy respect for the religious practices of others in ways that engage students. One must encounter “others” to appreciate existence beyond one’s own village. This Faculty Development International Seminar has given me another opportunity to explore the religious world beyond the walls of my own national village. This is invaluable because recognition of the ways in which religious life and thought influence human existence requires a coming together. As Martin Buber says, “all real living is meeting.”<sup>18</sup> For me this “meeting” fosters a recognition of religion as a complex reality extending far beyond the obvious. So conceived, religion, at its best, speaks of large realities that “exude out of the pores like sweat.”

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## Notes

1. Shiva Naipaul, *Love and Death in a Hot Country* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 104–105.
2. For example: *Varieties of Black Religious Experience: A Theological Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, forthcoming); and, “Rethinking the Nature and Tasks of African American Theology: A Pragmatic Perspective” in “Pragmatism and Recent African American Religious Thought,” a special edition of *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* (forthcoming).
3. Early evidence of a reluctance to address race issues is found in the move by Brazilian Finance Minister Dr. Rui Barbosa in 1890 to destroy all records of slavery and to outlaw racial classification as an item on the census. See Flavio Braune Wiik’s “When the Búzios Say ‘No!’”: The Cultural Construction of Aid and Its Social Disruptive Nature: The Case of Candomblé (Afro-Brazilian) Religion” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oslo-Norway, 1994), 41. I am grateful to Ahmed Samatar for bringing to my attention the following sources on race in Brazil: Abdias do Nascimento and Elisa Larkin Nascimento, *Africans in Brazil: A Pan-African Perspective* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, Inc., 1992); and Pierre-Michel Fontaine, ed., *Race, Class, and Power in Brazil* (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California, 1985).
4. See, for example, Alejandro Frigerio, “With the Banner of Oxalá: Social Construction and Maintenance of Reality in Afro-Brazilian Religions in Argentina” (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 1991).
5. As an example of this conversation, most point to Júlio Braga’s *Na Gamela do Feitiço: Repressão e Resistência nos Candomblés da Bahia* (Salvador da Bahia: CEAO/Edufba, 1995).
6. One of the organizations working to promote dialogue between *Candomblé* and Christian churches is KOINONIA (formerly the Ecumenical Documentation and Information Center), located in Rio de Janeiro. KOINONIA is an ecumenical organization responsible for the publication of books and a journal

devoted to religious understanding and globalization. It should be noted that dialogue between Christian churches in Brazil and *Candomblé* is a relatively recent occurrence.

I am extremely grateful for the assistance of this organization during my stay in Rio de Janeiro. In particular, I would like to thank Claudio for the day he spent helping me understand the religious landscape of Brazil.

7. For additional information in English on the history of this tradition, see Ruth Landes, *The City of Women* (1947; reprint, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994); Roger Bastide, *African Religions of Brazil: Toward a Sociology of the Interpenetration of Civilization*, trans. Helen Sebba (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, c1978).

In addition to *Candomblé* and *Umbanda* (associated with Rio de Janeiro), Brazil also houses other traditions such as *Macumba* (Rio de Janeiro) and *Shango* (Recife). See Diana Brown's *Umbanda: Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

8. See Wiik, appendix to "When the Búzios Say 'No!'" 171–78.

9. See Landes, *The City of Women*.

10. For information on initiation, see Wiik, chap. 6 in "When the Búzios Say 'No!'"

11. For information on this see, for example, KOINONIA, *Presence & Service*, no. 2 (August 1996): 6–8 and no. 1 (August 1995): 7.

12. See Livio Sansone, "The Local and Global in Today's Afro-Bahia," in Centro de Estudios y Documentación Latinoamericanos (CEDLA), *Popular Culture: Beyond Historical Legacy and Political Innocence* (Utrecht: CERES, 1995), 202.

13. The media and Bahian leaders began to pay more attention to Afro-Brazilian culture, notably religion, labeling this intellectual and philosophical development the "re-Africanization of Bahia" (Sansone, 1995, 202). Also see France Winddance Twine's "Mapping the Terrain of Brazilian Racism" in *Race & Class* 38, no. 3 (1997): 49–61.

14. Sansone, "The Local and Global," 199.

15. *Ibid.*, 197.

16. See, for example, Alejandro Frigerio, "With the Banner of Oxalá: Social Construction of Reality in Afro-Brazilian Religions in Argentina" (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 1989).

17. John Mason is a priest within the *Ifá* tradition and is the author of *Black Gods: Orisa Studies in the New World* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Yoruba Theological Archministry, 1995).

18. Cited in Fernando Altemeyer Jr., "Globalization and Inter-religious Dialogue" in *The Month: A Review of Christian Thought and World Affairs* 258, no. 1551 (March 1997): 114; Second New Series 30, no. 3.