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New religious movements and traditional Protestantism in Brazil

topics:

- popular religiosity in Brazil
- influence of Pentecostalism and “new religious movements”
- syncretism and “deregulation” of the Brazilian religious field
- pastoral challenges for the Protestant Churches

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Introduction

In Brazil, we have not intensely experienced the process of secularization. Even at the peak of the discussions on secularization (Bonhoeffer, Gogarten, Vahanian and others) and on the theology of the “death of God”, the positions of many ardent defenders of secularization seemed very artificial. Even so, at the beginning of the seventies there were already voices, such as Rubem Alves, a Brazilian Protestant theologian, saying that God had not died. Alves even pointed to a renaissance of religion that was in full bloom in Brazil.

In this light, I need to take as a point of departure the idea of “religious field” (as presented by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu). A “religious field” is a social space demarcated by symbolic interactions and institutions and trusted by our society for the administration of the sacred. In Latin America we are experiencing a mutation process within the religious field. What we are experiencing is that traditional borders are being diluted, or are becoming increasingly fluid, and that no religious institution is fixed or solidly in place in terms of defining or delimiting the religious field. For those of us who live in the situation, it seems that “everything that was solid is unmade, everything is in the air”. We continue like this in the midst of a renaissance of religiosity that is detached from many traditional religious institutions.

A parallel subject is related to the difficulties of calmly accepting the term “sect”, “church” or “denomination.” The first two are derived from the research of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch (*The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, London 1931). The term “denomination” was coined, in its current usage, by H. R. Niebuhr in the 1920's (*The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1929). From Troeltsch (op. cit. 443) the word “church” has been used to designate an “institution that was, as a result of the work of redemption, endowed with grace and salvation” and that can “receive the masses, and adjust itself to the world,” while “sect” is applied to “institutions formed by

volunteers, “composed of believing Christians, rigorous and explicit, united to each other by the fact all have experienced the new birth.” H. R. Niebuhr preferred to use the term “denominations” to study North American religious groups, while Bryan Wilson (*Sociology of Religious Sects*, Madrid, Guadarrama, 1970:26 ss) has called attention to the difficulties of applying the concept “sect” out of areas culturally dominated by the Christianity.

In Brazil the term “sect” was first used by the first specialists of the Protestant religious phenomenon at the end of the 1960’s, to show how religion works in society. Thus, perhaps more because of the influence of North American functionalism, religion was understood in the light of an adaptation process of the rural masses to an urban world, experienced by the migrants as source of hostility. In this sense, the term “sect” was used to refer to a group that stood back from the society, and “church” for that movement that provokes social interaction between the organized religious group and the society that contains it. Among the significant texts of that period we have that of Beatriz Muniz de Souza (*The Experience of Salvation: Pentecostals in São Paulo*, São Paulo, Two Cidades, 1969) and the classic text of the Swiss sociologist Lalive D’Epinay, (*The Refuge of the Masses*, Rio de Janeiro, Paz and Terra, 1970).

Later on, the term “sect” became a “political-ecclesiastical” weapon, used mainly by the Catholic Church to expose the new “non-Catholic” religious movements located outside the ambit of its influence or aloof to the ecumenical dialogue. Protestants, for their part, used such a term to classify those phenomenon located out of the boundaries established by the orthodoxy of its religious institutions. For example, this sense always appears in texts of apologetic character produced by various Protestant groups in Brazil. For these reasons, a simple evaluation of the current language can show us how much this terminology expresses ideological and political-ecclesiastical agendas. In other words, “sect” is always the group that is strange or contests the ecclesiastical reality of who those who use such concepts as weapons.

This sense of the word appeared in texts published under influence of the National Conference of the Bishops of Brazil (CNBB). Still in this decade, there are conceptual mixtures, sometimes even in academic works such as that of Florencio Galindo (*The Phenomenon of Fundamentalist Sects - The Evangelical Conquest of Latin America*, Estela, Verbo Divino, 1994), that refer to fundamentalist and Pentecostal “sects”, linking them to the process of “the evangelical invasion of Latin America.” Such approaches contribute to increase the current confusion, and have made, in our view, the paradigm “sect-church” unusable. The concept has become such an enormous and imprecise umbrella that is difficult to use it in the study of the Pentecostal phenomenon and other contemporary “new religious movements”. From here the truth of a phrase offered by Julio de Santa Ana (*in Religious Studies*, Year VI, no. 8, 1992, pp. 11-34) rings true. In the conclusion of his article he states that: “it seems to me clear that it is no long possible to affirm that ‘sect’ and ‘church’ are completely different realities.” There are still, however, specialists who have preserved the term “sect” much more for “reasons exclusively didactic” than for love and academic exactness. The term “new religious movements” offers some advantages over the use of the concept “sect-church.” Even so, we have to recognize that not everything is new in such movements.

Even so, before we advance the discussion I suggest an examination of the historical origins of the extent and current limits of the Brazilian religious field.

What forces have molded this field? What is happening now, in its interior? Is the Brazilian religious field being impacted by deregulation or is it coming apart? What issues does this raise in terms of the mission of the historical churches in the country?

The historical constitution of the Brazilian religious field

The Portuguese colonization of Brazil was linked to the construction of a Roman Catholic society in the New World capable of maintaining a medieval synthesis broken in Europe by the eruption of the Enlightenment and Protestantism. In this way, a religious-cultural matrix was formed, though not always directly managed by the hierarchy of the Church. In the interior of the country, a popular and rustic form of Catholicism appeared, based on the work of active lay persons, lay brotherhoods, which formed at a distance, in varying degrees, from catholic vicars (official agents of the church). Even so, Catholicism formed Brazilian identity and maintained the country, until the beginning of the 19th century, far from Protestant and anti-clerical philosophical influences that boiled in Europe.

There were, however, several attempts by Protestantism to penetrate the world of Brazil. The first happened in 1555, with the invasion of the bay of Guanabara by French sent by John Calvin and, later, in 1612, in Maranhao, in the north of the country. One other attempt occurred beginning in 1630, when Holland installed a colony in the northeast and remained in the region for approximately 30 years. When they were expelled, the group from Holland had close to two dozen reformed communities (Calvinist). Nonetheless, in the following 200 years nothing more occurred that disturbed the peace of Catholicism, beyond a few relatively sporadic attempts by foreigners dedicated to spreading the Bible, mainly at the beginning of the 19th century.

The great change would happen at the beginning of the 19th century, due to the influence of the Napoleonic wars that forced the Portuguese imperial family to settle in Brazil, under the protection of the English navy. Due to agreements imposed by the English, the Portuguese were obliged to open not only “ports to friendly nations” but also the religious field to the penetration of Protestantism. A second factor was the arrival of German and Swiss immigrants in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul and the marine area of Rio de Janeiro and Espírito Santo. A great part of these immigrants were Protestant (a majority were Lutherans) and beginning with their arrival the Catholic Church could not maintain its hegemony on the religious field.

Then, in 1835 the first Methodist missionaries arrived in Brazil. The first Protestant preacher to definitively settle in the country (1855) was Robert Kalley, a Scottish doctor, Congregationalist, previously from Ilha da Madeira, in Portugal. In 1859 the first Presbyterian missionary, Ashbel G. Simonton, arrived. In this same period philosophical pluralism grew in the country. As such, theories of evolution, positivism, French Maconry, socialist ideas, republicanism, Kardecism and various North American denominations and sects appeared for the first time. Only after 1930 did African religious movements, hidden by Africans during the period of slavery, enter the light of day to proclaim their presence. It was in this way that candomblé, umbanda and other regional forms of African worship entered the religious scene.

Pentecostalism entered Brazil only four years after its explosive appearance in the United States (after its appearance in the well-known phenomenon that took place on Azusa Street). In 1910, an Italian-American, of Presbyterian descent, founded the Christian Congregation in Brazil, in the city of São Paulo and in Santo Antonio de Platina, in the state of Paraná. The following year, two Swedish Baptist Pentecostals, from the United States, founded the Assembly of God Church in the north of the country, in Belém. In 1932, the Adventist Church of the Promise, a Pentecostal version of Adventism, was founded in the northeast of Brazil.

This panorama maintained itself more or less unaltered, though with considerable growth in Pentecostalism, particularly after the crisis of the 1930's, while historical Protestantism experienced a reduction in growth. In the 1950's a new religious trend appeared with the introduction of religious movements dedicated to preaching and the practice of divine cure. During this period the Foursquare Gospel Church was born along with the Pentecostal Church "Brazil for Christ" and, a little later (1961), the Pentecostal Church "God is Love". There have been, since this period, an explosion of small, Pentecostal movements and religious sects. Further great changes would occur in the 1970's with the appearance of Pentecostal groups with considerable presence in the media (radio and television), that emphasized divine cure, exorcism and the theology of prosperity. These groups have been called "Neopentecostals".

The deregulation of the Brazilian religious field

We have seen that in a religious field there are never moments that are permanently static or fixed. What there are, are moments marked by slower changes, through agreements between actors and institutions, which give the impression that there is stability in the religious field. We have worked in UMESP (The Methodist University of São Paulo) with the hypothesis that this new form of being Pentecostal is tied to a process of deregulation of the religious field. This is because, in this "new form of being Pentecostal", there is an abandonment of characteristics traditionally emphasized by the Protestantism (authority of the Bible over tradition, the universal priesthood of believers, and salvation exclusively by grace) or a weakening of the emphases of "classic Pentecostalism" (for example: the gift of tongues, psychological trance attributed to the Holy Spirit and the immanent expectation of the second coming of Christ).

Parallel to the arrival of Protestants and of new ideologies in vogue in Europe, there was also in Brazil the incorporation of religiosities tied to either the Roman Catholic matrix or to non-Christian influences, such as Afro-Brazilian cults or Kardecists, which can be described as follows:

- a) *Kardecism* – Of French origin, this group believes that energy is present in objects and people, and can be directed for healing or objectives indicated by the medium or religious agents who have received special revelations from the sacred.
- b) *Candomblé* – The spirits are divided between good and evil. After the death of the ones who have received them for "habitation", they wander in search of "empty" bodies (be that an airport or a horse) where they can descend and find new "habitation". Evil is always caused by wickedness committed by other persons (the evil eye or sorceries) or by "spiritual works" sent by fathers or mothers-of-saints, capable of bewitching persons at a distance. For Neopentecostals, after their being called forth by the pastor-exorcist, demons (creators of all evil) should

be exorcised. Also, objects need to be exorcised and blessed because they can also be impregnated by demonic powers. For this reason, Neopentecostals use, and give great importance to, various objects “charged with power”, such as “prayed over oil”, “blessed water”, “rocks from Mount Sinai”, “blessed water from the River Jordan”, and so forth. Such objects (that carry a strong magical sense in the popular imagination) bring strength, well being and prosperity. For example, course salt and anointed roses are often used as carriers of this type of power. Thus, temples become distributors of “new sacraments”. They are, in the words of Saint Augustine: “visible signs of invisible graces.”

c) *Popular and Rural Catholicism* incorporates visions of the world that belong to Popular Brazilian Catholicism. Among these we encounter: Concern with objects that mediate between the sacred and the profane; the use of objects such as the cross and sacred water; the need to make promises to God that function as sacrifices in order to receive certain earthly blessings. There is also an emphasis on *do ut des* religiosity, which has been rejected by Protestantism since the Reform of the 16th century.

There is, therefore, a process of religious *syncretism* taking place in which visions of the world, traditions and objects originating in various religious and historical sources are being combined. All of this takes place within a new mold, without larger worries regarding the possibility of internal contradictions.

On the other hand, elements and values oriented by the market are also being introduced into religious practices. This is indicated by the demand for productivity on the part of pastors, the rational calculation of the effectiveness of their activities, the use of *marketing* to attract new “clients”, the development of the idea that the ends justify the means and a strong emphasis on advertising results such as miracles and cures obtained.

The result of all of this is a climate of competition, of pluralism and of little space for ecumenical practices. The most that occurs are momentary strategic alliances around immediate political and ecclesiastical interests. However, these soon fall apart because they do not occur at the level of ideas, only persons.

This new religiosity, allied with the conditions present in post-modernity, has made Neopentecostalism a mass phenomenon in Brasil. Consequently, it exercises a contaminating power over other religious groups installed in the country since the second half of the past century. With this, it provokes: An emptying of historically more liberal and even fundamentalist churches and a movement toward Pentecostalism within Protestant groups, at least at liturgical if not theological levels. It has also influenced the growth of the charismatic movement within the Catholic Church, which can be called the “Pentecostalization of Catholicism”.

Historical challenges for traditional Protestantism

Without the concern of exhausting the subject, I would like to present some of the theological, liturgical and pastoral challenges that the Neopentecostal explosion presents to historical Protestantism in Brazil and Latin America.

Theological challenges – Oral revelation vs. Written revelation (reduction of rationality), all connected to the force of visual communication; Universal priesthood of believers vs. the power of the prophet or of pastors “divinely revealed”, in an authoritarian and manipulative relationship; Sola Gratia vs. sacrifice and

works, following the presuppositions of the ideology of prosperity (not specifically theological and much less Christian, since even oriental groups in vogue in Brazil, such as *Seicho-no-ie*, for example, have such teachings).

Liturgical challenges – Worship is transformed into a show (theater), with the process of emptying the word and exaggerating praise. The expression of emotion is valued. The demand for a new type of pastor, the “animator of the auditorium” model vs. the traditional Protestant model of the “learned one” or “doctor”. This new “cultural intermediary” model does not demand an academic formation, but it does demand that the pastor be able how to get a good collection, do cures or lead an exorcism.

Pastoral challenges – The pastor should be at the service of the needs of the “poor” and the “needy”. Among these are putting lives back together which have been torn apart by the use of alcohol, drugs and family strife. The pastor should also stimulate the dreams and hopes of persons (a religion of marketing aimed at the realization of dreams) in a process of insertion in the ideology of the market of a society driven by consumption. On the other hand, the community becomes a place shelter or of recharging psycho-emotional-spiritual batteries, worn down in a world on which still hovers the force of secularization.

Conclusion

We concluded our comments insisting that religion in Latin America, especially historical Protestantism, Pentecostalism and even Catholicism, have experienced a profound process of mutation. This process is characterized by deregulation of relationships woven together over the course of a century and a half, as well as by the crumbling of institutions that appeared to be solid. Marx’s well-known expression that what is seemingly “solid comes apart in the air” seems to fit this reality well. Nonetheless, the search for a new enchantment with the world is reborn and old and new forms of articulating religious experience cross and collide in search of hegemony of the religious field.

To further complicate matters, religious institutions start to act like companies, using marketing strategies to attract followers, while, ironically, commercial and industrial companies assume ideological and religious postures, provoking religious loyalties on the part of their employees. This reality has been studied by Max Pagès et al. (*L'emprise de l'organisation*, Paris, Presses Universitaire de France, 1979), as well as by Albert Piette (*Les religiosités séculiers*, Paris, Presses Universitaires of France, 1993).

In other words, the sacred is emigrating from traditional religious institutions to new religious movements and even to institutions and movements seemingly non-religious. Obviously, this new situation demands deep reflection on the part of the Christian intellectuals, particularly those that are entrusted with planning the strategy of the Church in these new cultural contexts.

Translated by James R. Farris