

Religion as (Blurred) Moral Boundaries: Umbanda and Pentecostalism in a Changing Social Context.

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'Religion as (Blurred) Moral Boundaries: Umbanda and Pentecostalism in a Changing Social Context.' En: Westerlund, David (comp.), *Pentecostal Others: Transcontinental Religious Encounters*. Londres: Tauris.

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Pentecostal growth has been one of the more prominent topics of research in the study of Latin American religion. After the pioneering initiatives of Emilio Willems (1967) and Christian L. D'Epinay (1968) and, especially, since the contributions of David Martin (1990) and David Stoll (1990) reopened the field, an ongoing production ensued. The approaches to Latin American Pentecostalism have been manifold, but some persistent questions have pervaded the academic field. The effects of Pentecostalism in the daily life of converts, especially the urban poor, has been one of the preferred topics. The aggregate impact of massive conversion in the economical and political institutions of Latin American nations has also been a predominant object of study. Initially, there was some controversy between Willems and D'Epinay over the degree in which this kind of 'popular Protestantism' fostered social reform or improved the condition of the urban poor. But, towards the end of the 1990s, a growing consensus was established finding a series of benign effects of Pentecostal growth in Latin American societies. At the personal level, many researchers reported the multiple adaptive strategies that conversion to Pentecostalism opened for those facing material needs or suffering from status stress. At the level of collective institutions, more audacious scholars, speculated over the possible thrust or hindrance that massive conversion could represent for the modernization and democratization of Latin America (Martin, 1990; Bastian, 1997).

In considering the micro and macro effects of Pentecostal growth, much of the argument has implicitly been put in terms of subjective and, in the end, moral reform. In almost every research, conversion to Pentecostalism has been seen, either, as promoting a new set of (modern) values or reinforcing adhesion to them, immersing social subjects

in a moral order that fostered habits and attitudes with extraordinary adaptive capacities. Be these the ability to sustain self esteem or long term expectations and projects in the face of extreme deprivation or the capacity to promote the entrepreneurial and republican predispositions associated with industrialized and democratic societies. Thus, in this perspective, the effects of Pentecostalism emerge from its power to project conventional / modern values onto a transcendental dimension making them less vulnerable or more desirable in otherwise unfavourable conditions. Or put slightly in a different way, Pentecostalism would establish categories of right and wrong that order the experienced world (Schutz 1974). This order favours habits and attitudes that at the same time benefit those suffering from deprivation and promote modern social institutions.

Argentina was a late bloomer as compared to other Latin American countries in respect to Pentecostal growth. Although the first Pentecostals arrived in Buenos Aires in the 1920s, significant growth and prominence of its churches only occurred in the late 1980s. This was some 20 years later than Brazil, Chile or parts of Central America where Pentecostalism experienced significant growth already in the 1950s and 1960s and had a new expansive wave in the 1980s. As in the rest of Latin America, Argentinian Pentecostalism grew among the urban poor who found in its doctrine and ritual significant means to endure increasingly unfavourable social conditions. In the 1980s, a strong recession of the Argentinian labour market, associated to a rampant inflation, put to the test traditional life styles characterized by stable nuclear families, reasonable expectations of upward social mobility and steady employment. In this context, Pentecostalism did not really introduce a *new* set of values or promoted inexistent work or economic habits. It also did not bring dramatic changes in gender roles or restructure family ties. Instead of introducing new elements in Argentinian

culture, its doctrine and ritual served the purpose of giving, what were already secular values, a transcendental aura, helping those whose traditional lifestyle was been jeopardized to sustain their belief in it in spite of growing instability and recurrent crises. This process implied recasting the symbols embodying those customary ways of life in a religious ritual context and language that gave them a sacred undertone. And, given the role that Peronismo had played in establishing these habits, it was not unusual for women in leadership positions in church to adopt postures and a dressing style that resembled Evita (Semán and Míguez, 2000) or to recast the social and work ethics introduced by Peronismo as a religious - Pentecostal - doctrine.

However, if the changes in the social structure in the 1980s may be associated with Pentecostal growth, the worsening conditions experienced by the urban poor in the 1990s did not seem to promote a further expansion of converts. Instead of a continuing 'spiritual awakening' the late 1990s and initial 2000s seem associated with the fall of the big Pentecostal ministries that had emerged in the 1980s, like Ondas de Amor y Paz, Visión de Futuro and the healing ministry of Carlos Anaconndia.ⁱ And, even as early as 1994—1995, small neighbourhood churches did not receive the incoming flow of new converts they had welcomed in every Sunday service during the late 1980s. The drought in new converts may be linked to the long-term effects of a restrictive labour market. For the second or third generation of structurally unemployed - those that descended from already unemployed parents and were trying to access the labour market in the 1990s - the worth of traditional life styles and values became increasingly relative. Among these generations Pentecostal ritual and doctrine - its efforts to sustain what finally were customary habits and worldviews - faced a greater challenge. They could not appeal to deeply naturalized and unquestioned perceptions and attitudes, but had the more difficult task of attracting a growingly reticent audience. Namely, a new

generation that had never experienced the conditions in which traditional lifestyles were sustained and, worse, lived in conditions that made them quite unviable. Therefore, Pentecostalism ended up proposing a lifestyle that many potential believers found hard to follow.

While Pentecostalism became exposed to these new challenges, other religious alternatives, like Afro-Brazilian Spiritism, found increasingly favourable grounds among the urban poor, especially in the more marginalized sectors within them. The capacity of these religions to blur the boundaries between good and evil and their tendency to challenge the traditional dualistic tendencies that are part of Christian conventionalism made them more 'functional' in the new social scenario. Although they did not grow into massive numbers, they became increasingly attractive in a context where material and social conditions turned mere survival into a paramount and daily problem. In fact, the type of moral of Afro-Brazilian religions reflects the profound changes in the structure of the social bonds characteristic of poor urban neighbourhoods. During the 1990s while accessing the monetary market hardened by the lack of jobs, exchanges based on mutual trust were increasingly unviable, given a social context that limited the capacity of individuals to comply with their reciprocal obligations. Therefore, the traditional survival strategy of the urban poor of complementing monetary income with informal exchange based on trust (Lomnitz 1989) was progressively substituted by a more predatory logic. Delinquency became a more frequent way of life and theft and violence between ghetto dwellers increasingly common (Puex 2003).

The moral fostered by certain varieties of Afro-Brazilian Spiritism that tolerate these sorts of transgression became, thus, more commonplace. As some people found in them an alternative, unconventional, moral order that justified those actions and

spiritual beings that could favour them. However, the obvious costs of an unsafe and unstable lifestyle that results from embracing this alternative were not unfelt by followers. This, in part, explains why Afro-Brazilian Spiritism has remained a marginal and stigmatized religion in Argentina, even after its relative growth.

These changes resulted then in a complex scenario where an increasing number of moral and related religious alternatives were possible. Each of them generated its own benefits but also had liabilities. As we will try to show in what follows, the analysis of these differing possibilities allows us to understand the intricate relationships between social conditions and religious affiliation, and also casts some light on the recent evolution of the Argentinian religious field.

Pentecostalism as a Survival Strategy

It is by now common wisdom in the study of popular religion that the growth of Pentecostalism in many parts of the world is associated with the multiple means it provides to endure hardship. Therefore, it is also no surprise that times of crises and social unrest are the more frequent scenarios of Pentecostal growth. The number of studies showing the ability of Pentecostalism to provide its followers with such adaptive means is by now quite extensive, to the point that it is impossible to present a thorough summary here. But, for the Latin American case, the study of Cecilia Mariz (1994) provides a good synthesis. Mariz's comparative perspective contrasts the material, political and cultural strategies that three religious groups (Pentecostalism, Catholic Base Communities, and Afro-Brazilian Spiritism) provide to the urban poor. In exploring these alternatives she finds that all religious groups offer some type of help in all of these fields, although there are differences between them in the way and degree in

which it is provided. For example, in contrast with Catholic Base Communities and Afro-Brazilian Spiritism, Pentecostals do not usually offer direct material help. However, they do promote networks of mutual support that provide assistance in times of need; and they, as well, create paths of economic improvement and occasionally of direct upward mobility for successful religious leaders, something that also tends to occur in Afro-Brazilian cults.

Besides its (limited) capacity to provide material help, Pentecostalism seems ill prepared to be of any 'political' assistance, since its involvement in systems of political patronage is limited - even if it has occasionally made certain inroads into the political system (especially in Brazil), it never developed as a strong competitor or ally of traditional parties. However, while Mariz's analysis shows that the material and political help provided by Pentecostals is limited in several aspects, it also clearly discovers a key dimension in explaining the *cultural* attraction that Pentecostalism exerts among the urban poor. An essential contribution of Mariz's analysis starts with her perception that poverty is not solely a material issue; economic deprivation has significant consequences in other aspects of life. Poor people's sensation of being socially worthless generates in them a low self esteem and a loss of personal dignity that is often conducive to damaging behaviours; such as alcoholism and domestic violence. According to Mariz, Pentecostalism provides means to psychologically endure the damaging effects of poverty. The essential means are based on a symbolic contestation/adaptation to the social order that avoid the sense of worthlessness and senselessness that being poor in a consumer society produces. Mariz describes a series of mechanisms that operate in this direction, like the 'experiences of the supernatural'.

The possibility that ordinary people can be in touch with the supernatural world is a characteristic of almost all religions that are popular among the poor [...]

The belief that any participant in a religious organization can deal directly with God fosters the development of small, autonomous groups. This belief also increases the self-esteem of the poor (1994: 137).

A second mechanism by which Pentecostalism contributes to improve poor people's condition is by 'fostering experiences of human dignity'. Mariz shows how these are, in part, effected by stressing a formal treatment in every day life (e.g. addressing other church members in formal ways and dressing in a very conservative manner) that help to elude the usual stigmatization suffered by the urban poor and win the appearance of respectable citizens:

The appearance of decency and the conservative dress do in fact protect poor women from been treated like prostitutes and poor men from been considered thieves. As Gilkes shows, Pentecostal clothing also protects black women in the Unites States. Gilke's opinion is shared by many Brazilian Pentecostals. Sebastião says young Pentecostals woman's clothing serves as a form of protection. Neusa chose the word *armadura*, which means 'armour', to refer to the sober clothing of a believer. Therefore, the very much criticized repressive aspects of Pentecostal morality may play an instrumental role in supporting respectful treatment of the poor and strengthening poor people's self esteem (Mariz 1994:142).

A third way in which Pentecostalism helps the poor is by allowing them to overcome a certain sense of powerlessness common to their condition. This creates the sensation that miraculous interventions in their life are possible, and therefore that any obstacle (health, material, family problems etc.) may be defeated. Contrary to what it is many times believed, in these situations people do not remain passive awaiting for a miracle to happen. Instead, they engage in a persistent struggle to overcome their problems, assured by the sensation that if they do enough, God will eventually intervene in their favour. Another constitutive element of Pentecostal strategies to strive against poverty is given by what Mariz calls a 'sense of coherence'.

In contrast with Afro-Brazilian Spiritism, Pentecostalism emphasizes the meaning of miracles and their relationship to God's will. Therefore, if a healing fails to occur, there must be some reason, a meaning to be ascribed. [...] Faith in a divine logic that guides and determines life offers a psychological advantage in the struggle for survival. An Israeli sociologist Aaron Antonovsky, identified what he called lawfulness, or a 'sense of coherence' as the principal psychological element that differentiated people who were able to survive concentration camps and establish a relatively healthy life from those who could never make this adjustment (Mariz 1994:147).

Besides Mariz's findings, other studies show further fields where Pentecostalism may have benign effects. For example, Elisabeth Brusco (1996) and Lesly Gill (1993) discovered the same underlying mechanism of cultural reformation in curbing machismo. While David Smild (2003) found that turning Pentecostal is also a mean to escape social violence among young gang members in Venezuela - those who convert

are conceived as having ‘abandoned the game’ and are thus not included in the inter-gang reciprocal violence system called ‘*culebra*’. Pentecostalism has even been seen to create more peaceful environments among interns in otherwise very violent prisons or to help addicts to overcome their habits when several ‘secular’ treatments have failed (Míguez, 2002).

Underlying all the different cases and contexts, in which Pentecostalism is said to have beneficial effects, there seems to be one common mechanism already suggested by Mariz. Pentecostalism structures a causal order that allows converts to regain a feeling or sense of control over their lives. It provides believers a set of obligations with which they must comply, but in return they become worthy of much desired benefits. It thus establishes a moral order by which merits may be accumulated that, in the end, guarantee believers access to, at least, their basic needs if not to a relatively promissory future. As in Clifford Geertz’s (1973) definition of religion, the moral order acquires a factual capacity by the intervention of transcendental forces that may overcome any worldly obstacle, and in that, it allows believers to regain a sense of control of their lives. Comparative studies tend to see that Pentecostalism, in this respect, has certain advantages to other popular religious groups.

For example, as Mariz herself implies, Afro-Brazilian Spiritism seems to be less governed by rules not being able to provide a sense of lawfulness and order - spiritual beings behave in disorderly manner and there is no clear set of rules to gain control of them or of personal destiny (Howe and Fry 1975). While Catholic Base Communities’ orientation towards politics allocate power in very worldly institutions, already experienced as exploitive or indifferent by the poor. However, the effects of these alternative moral orders need further exploration. Current and former studies of Pentecostalism tend to stress the adaptive capacities of a quite conformist doctrine,

since, in spite of a limited set of alternative values, the core tenets of Pentecostal theology seem fairly conventional. Thus, more than creating a confrontational set of values, Pentecostalism fosters the (cultural) conditions in which social outcasts can participate of conventional social institutions. In this, the adaptive capacity that spun from a worldview that more radically rejects customary values and life styles has been less explored. In addition, it is probably this bias that, in comparative studies, repeatedly finds Pentecostalism the more suited religion for the urban poor, while underestimating the alternative possibilities underlying in less explored religious options.

Afro-Brazilian Morals

Afro-Brazilian Spiritism has resulted from a multifaceted syncretism between *Yoruba* religion (brought by West African slaves in the 19th century), Catholicism, Kardec teachings and indigenous beliefs of Brazilian aborigines. The new religions initially resulted from efforts made by slaves to preserve their original beliefs by merging the deities and ancestors they worshiped with Catholic saints. But in this fusion two moral orders were clearly at stake. Since, the dualistic tendencies of Christianity did not resemble the unbounded morals of Yoruba spirits, who did not respond to an abstract set of values, but to the will and transactions between worshipers and spirits. The fusion, however, Christianized the more popular version of the cult, namely Umbanda, where ‘higher’ spiritual beings assumed a more conventional moral behaviour - although ‘lower’ spirits are less bounded by principles. At the same time, other Afro-Brazilian religions, as Candomble, remained as more pure ‘African’ alternatives, which did not become so deeply Christianized in their doctrine and ritual. In addition, even within

Umbanda, kimbanda (black magic that involves evil spirits) remains as a common, although hidden practice, in most terreiros (places of worship).

This syncretism represents the capture of the religion of the *orixás* [Umbanda] within a model that presupposes, above all, the existence of two antagonistic poles, that rule over every human action: good and evil; on one side virtue, and on the other sin. This Jewish/Christian conception did not exist in Africa. The relationships between gods and human beings, as it happens in other ancient polytheistic religions, were guided by sacrificial precepts and taboos. Every *Orixá* had its prescriptive and restrictive rules applicable to its devotees, as it can still be observed in Candomblé, where there is no code of behaviour that can be applied indistinctly to every member of society; whereas in the Christian tradition a unified law is the key for a universal system that classifies everything as part of good or evil, conceived as mutually exclusive categories.ⁱⁱ [my translation]

Thus, although Christianization affected the traditional morals enmeshed in Yoruba religion, part of them clearly survived in Afro-Brazilian Spiritism. These rebel undertones can also be seen in the fact that the Afro-Brazilian pantheon has identified with the outcasts of society. In spite that higher spirits are usually identified with natural forces; lesser, but still very powerful, spirits may come from the lower levels of the social ladder: prostitutes (*pomba giras*), thieves, old African slaves (*preto velhos*), sailors (*marinheiros*) worriers of the aboriginal tribes (*caboclos*) form a substantial part of the Afro-Brazilian spiritual world. Thus, beyond a certain conventional façade, Afro-Brazilian cults champion an alternative perception of good and evil:

We should not forget that Afro-Brazilian religions are religions that accept the world as it is. This world is considered as a place where all personal realizations are possible and morally desirable. The good follower of the religion of the *Orixás* has to do everything in his power to make his wishes come true, since it is through human realization that the gods become stronger and can help

their followers. The effort to be happy cannot subside in front of any barrier, even if this happiness implies the misfortune of others.ⁱⁱⁱ [my translation]

According to recent research, a relative de-Christianization is taking place in Afro-Brazilian religions. Formerly hidden aspects of ritual and doctrine are starting to appear in the public light, yielding growing space for more unprincipled spirits, like *marineros* and *bahianos*.^{iv} In the extreme limit appears what some analysts have called ‘Umbanda Bandido’ directly related to illegal or criminal activities, showing a growing tendency among Afro-Brazilian cults to deviate from conventional morals.

The inroads of Afro-Brazilian religions in Argentina are complex. Their more public and conventional aspects have been present for many years, since the 1960s, although its constituency remained a very small minority within the local religious field (Frigerio and Carozzi 1992). But, in recent years, the presence of these religions among the marginal sectors of society has increased. In its more obvious aspect, this may be perceived in the growing numbers of *terreiros* and the increasing familiarity of people with their doctrines and ritual practices. At a more subtle level, they appear merged with traditional popular Catholicism, introducing new elements and perceptions that affect the way people conceive the transcendental world and their relationship with it. This many times occurs without people consciously drawing on Afro-Brazilian beliefs and practices (in fact, most people have just a very superficial understanding of them). Instead, they spontaneously fuse elements at hand without thorough knowledge of doctrines and ritual. Extreme cases of these processes, holding metonymic relationships with more general changes in public morals among the urban poor, may be found by exploring the canonization as popular saints of young delinquents gunned by the police. Although the canonization of bandits is not completely new, subtle changes are present in the actual processes.

For example, in traditional mythology the unlawful actions of bandits were justified as amending previous injustice (Hobsbawn, 1976). Instead, in the canonization of Frente Vital, a juvenile delinquent that lived in the northern outskirts of Buenos Aires and was killed by the police, followers make no effort to redeem his illegal deeds. His worshipers portray Frente Vital as a thief who enjoyed crime and had no regrets about it, although he is also seen as a local Robin Hood by slum dwellers. His addiction to drugs has also not been a problem in his popular consecration as a saint. Moreover, guns and drugs are offered at his tomb in return for miracles. And besides the usual demand in matters of health, love and personal finance, young delinquents ask also for help to commit crimes and deal with the police. Therefore, in his canonization Frente Vital has not been transformed to adjust to conventional morals, instead alternative values have been partly consecrated by projecting them onto the transcendental world through a, now, sacred being.

The canonization of Frente Vital was accomplished by a complex syncretism between traditional Catholic devotions and a very loose practice of Afro-Brazilian Spiritism. Frente has been said to attend to a local faith healer to ask for protection in criminal events. Although the faith healer did not exactly consider herself a Mae de Santo, a leader of Umbanda religion, she occasionally did practise certain Afro-Brazilian rites. Through her, Frente came to know Ogum, the Yoruba divinity of war and metal identified with Saint George. As a formerly human spirit, Ogum indulges in mundane treats. Offerings to him, hence, include beer, cigars and popcorn and even if, as a higher spiritual being, he cannot officially be asked to participate in wrongdoings, the lesser spirits within his order may be invoked to do so. But since the figure of Ogum is unfamiliar to Argentinian tradition, Frente - as, in general, many other juvenile delinquents - worshiped Ogum through the more familiar figure of Saint George, who

paradoxically is also the patron saint of the local police forces. Besides tattooing a figure of Saint George in his back to win protection from police, Frente also worshiped the Catholic saint by offering cigars and beer to him, also something common among juvenile delinquents. Hence, through the identification with Ogum, Saint George became at the same time the patron saint of police and juvenile delinquents, only that in the version worshiped by this last group unconventional offerings become commonplace.

Although Afro-Brazilian religions allow space to worship unconventional spirits, canonizations do not easily admit the devotion of those that have recently departed. Therefore, the time logics of these religions would hardly admit the worship of a recently deceased as Frente Vital, although his unconventional morals would not represent a problem. Inversely, while the unconventional morals of Frente would not be openly accepted in popular Catholicism, immediate post-mortem canonization does not seem to be a problem. Hence, the devotion of Frente appears to combine the temporal logics of popular Catholicism with the moral logics of Afro-Brazilian Spiritism. As suggested, this syncretism projects an alternative moral view onto an otherworldly dimension. Actions and behaviours that appear as conflictive with conventional values acquire legitimacy as they turn into principles accepted by transcendental beings, be they traditional Afro-Brazilian deities or the local saints created through these new forms of syncretism.

In contrast with Pentecostalism, the adaptive strategy obtained through this alternative is not to create a series of habits and perceptions that favour conventional lifestyles in otherwise very unfavourable conditions. Instead, Afro-Brazilian Spiritism creates a moral order in which a completely unconventional or even 'illegal' lifestyle becomes more natural and acceptable. Of course, adopting this last alternative brings in

its own costs. Social and psychological instability usually accompany a lifestyle that involves recurrent conflict and violence. However, in contexts of extreme deprivation, and especially in certain stages in an individual's lifespan, the capacity to exert and resist force becomes a dignifying experience that competes with the more peaceful strategies opened by evangelicalism. When a restrictive labour market obtrudes the traditional and conventional ways of gaining self esteem (professional and economic progress, being a provider for one's family, etc.) the physical exposure, braveness and endurance that are part of a conflictive lifestyle can be the basis of personal dignity - especially for the younger generations. In this manner, we find that in a very different way than Pentecostalism, the moral and social order expressed and legitimized through Afro-Brazilian Spiritism also provides resources to psychologically and culturally endure deprivation - even if the personal losses that frequently result from violence and conflict can make its practitioners regret the chosen alternative.

We can then see, through religious change, that two apparently contrasting social and moral orders, providing different types of adaptive resources, have become available to the urban poor in Argentina: the peaceful ways of Pentecostalism that favour inclusion in conventional institutions and the alternative expressed in Afro-Brazilian Spiritism that favour a more confrontational adaptive strategy. Now, even if these two alternatives appear as irreconcilable, the respective and, in certain ways, complementary costs and benefits that each brings under its wing in specific situations makes the frontiers that separate them more labile than one can initially suspect. As we will see, what lies under this process is not a chaotic or irrational conduct, but instead a quite cautious search for appropriate social, spiritual and moral resources in critical moments.

Conclusions

Usually, comparative studies between Pentecostalism and other religious options for the poor have concluded that the growth of the former can be explained by the greater adaptive capacities it fosters. Pentecostal growth in contexts of material and social deprivation has been seen as the result of its ability to integrate people into the conventional social order, diminishing the relative costs of marginalization. However, it has also been recognized that it carries its own liabilities. Frequent participation in Pentecostal networks may alienate people from former social ties among their kin, neighbours and unconverted friends. Also, the time consuming activities in church may limit the capacity to assume other undertakings, like job opportunities, that would improve even more the condition of the less well off (Roberts 1968; Mariz 1994). In addition to these limitations, the cultural strategies of Pentecostalism also limit the possibility to question the social order. Even if Pentecostal doctrine and ritual usually contain certain rebel elements,^v it hardly proposes a radical alternative. In the end, the lifestyle of Pentecostal converts follows basic social conventions. This is even more evident when we look at the alternatives generated by certain varieties of Afro-Brazilian Spiritism.

The popular canonization processes we have observed, where Afro-Brazilian Spiritism has played a central part, allow devotees to create an alternative moral order. Conventional criteria of good and evil are substituted for other principles that add legitimacy to alternative lifestyles. Thus, they create a social space where what is utterly rejected by society in general is openly accepted by transcendental beings: otherworldly moral becomes more venial than its inner worldly counterpart, adjusted to traditional Christian principles. This strategy of creating a sort of 'cocoon' with alternative values

to endure deprivation has also been seen as part of what Pentecostal churches provides to its members. What is different in this case is not the general strategy in itself, but the degree of confrontation with conventional society it fosters. However, as in the case of Pentecostalism, turning to the Afro-Brazilian option has also built-in costs. Alienating oneself from conventional society not only implies establishing a greater distance from other social ties, but also reinforces ongoing conflict with conventional institutions, such as police and school. But even more, in contrast with Pentecostal communities that promote close social bonds among its members, the same morals present in the varieties of Afro-Brazilian Spiritism we are exploring do not favour stable social ties. In fact, these devotions produce more of an (a)moral community than a social one. People do not frequently interact with one another as members of a church, they individually appeal to cult leaders and (through them) to spiritual beings for help. Because of this, the systems of mutual exchange based on trust favoured in Pentecostal communities do not necessarily find friendly grounds among members of Afro-Brazilian religions.

In order to understand the way people have related to these religious and moral alternatives, and evaluated its relative costs and possibilities it is necessary to consider the social contexts that emerged from the structural changes of the 1980s and 1990s. Initially, in the 1980s, the traditional Catholic monopoly was challenged by Pentecostalism, as more and more people found in this form of evangelicalism means to endure the growing menaces to their traditional lifestyles. But, if the changes in the 1980s already implied a crisis in the more or less unified pattern that related income to stable employment in the formal job market, the changing social conditions in the 1990s promoted an even greater diversification of the sources of family income and personal lifestyles. Especially, the younger generations experienced a turn to a combination (at the same or different times) that ranged from odd jobs still in the legal sphere, to semi-

legal or directly illegal sources of income. Of course, the changing insertion in the job market did not only affect the stability and origin of the household earnings, but the complete traditional lifestyle, including family structure, daily routines, places and context of socialization and sociability.

Given these multiple contexts of insertion and interaction, for many among the urban poor, moral became situational: it could hardly consist in a set of stable and abstract principles appropriate for every circumstance. The changing situations they had to face made, at times, conventional values (thus Pentecostalism) applicable; but, in other moments, the costs of accepting them appeared unbearable. For example, when the lack of a job made starvation an immediate possibility robbery could seem a better alternative than ongoing prayer, thus a predatory behaviour and Afro-Brazilian Spirits could be of much help. When economic opportunities arose, even in the informal job market, ongoing effort and endurance could seem better than running the risks of a violent life. At this moment conventional morals and Pentecostalism could provide a safer heaven. And, it is important to bear in mind that the change from one situation to the other could occur in a matter of weeks, or even days, making adhesion to moral options extremely labile.

Thus, when we look at the context resulting from the changes in the 1990s, we find the structural bases that promoted a moral diversification among the urban poor. They turned, what were very unconventional religious alternatives, like Afro-Brazilian Spiritism, increasingly familiar and functional in comparison to more morally structured options as Pentecostalism. However, the new lifestyles and types of social relationships resulting from these changes were not so easily naturalized by the older generations, and also brought in costs and bitter moments. Thus, the halt in Pentecostal growth was not followed by an explosion of adherents to Afro-Brazilian cults. Instead, it gave way to a

cautious attitude, it made people explore otherwise inadmissible options, not so much to blindly turn to them, but more to consider these alternatives as applicable in particular occasions. The emergence of Afro-Brazilian religion among the urban poor has made more legitimate what were otherwise very illegitimate options, but it did not predetermine in itself the alternative that a particular individual would select in a given scenario. Occasional adhesion to such religions, or to Pentecostalism, did (and does) not imply perpetual and abstract adherence to its code. This has resulted in a diversification of religious and moral options blurring the 'official' limits between them as people went about trying to make sense of their personal trajectories and canvass situational alternatives. Pentecostalism and Afro-Brazilian Spiritism, conventional dualist morals or their more 'situational' counterparts, have become options in an enlarging menu of possibilities. An expansion that has resulted from the need to increase and diversify the social, spiritual and moral resources at hand in a context where traditional means were less and less available.

ⁱ See Hilario Wynarczyck (1989) and Matt Marostica (1997) for a story of these ministries.

ⁱⁱ O sincretismo representa a captura da religião dos orixás dentro de um modelo que pressupõe, antes de mais nada, a existencia de dois polos antagónicos que presidem todas as ações humanas: o bem e o mal; de um lado a virtude, do outro o pecado. Essa concepção, que é a judaico-cristã, não existia na África. As relações entre os seres humanos e os deuses, como ocorre em outras antigas religiões politeístas, eram orientadas pelos preceptos sacrificiais e pelo tabu, e cada orixá tinha suas normas prescritivas e restritivas próprias aplicáveis aos seus devotos, como ainda se observa no candomblé, não havendo um código de comportamento e valores único aplicable a toda a sociedade indistintamente, como no cristianismo, uma lei única que é a chave para o estabelecimento universal de un sistema que tudo classifica como sendo do bem ou do mal, em categorias mutuamente exclusivas. (Prandi, forthcoming).

ⁱⁱⁱ Devemos no lembrar que as religiões afro-brasileiras são religiões que aceitam o mundo como ele é. Este mundo é considerado o lugar onde todas as realizações pessoais são moralmente desejáveis e possíveis. O bom seguidor das religiões dos orixás deve fazer todo o possível para que seus desejos se realizem, pois é a través de a realização humana que os deuses ficam mais fortes, e podem assim mais nos ajudar. Esse empenho em ser feliz não pode se enfraquecer diante de nenhuma barreira, mesmo que a felicidade implique o infortunio de outro. (Prandi, 1996:151)

^{iv} Bahianos and bahianas are happy spirits, identified with carnival, dancing and white attires. Usually groups of bahianos and bahianas are part the Scolas do Zamba during carnival parades.

^v The material goals of consumer society are substituted for spiritual ones and ‘the world’ is condemned as a place of sin from which the brethren are rescued.

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