Racism and Religious Intolerance: A Critical Analysis of the Coloniality of Brazilian Christianity

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Abstract

This article examines the persistence of religious intolerance experienced by practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions. Drawing from recent reports and historical resources on religious intolerance, it approaches religious diversity in Brazil from a decolonial perspective, pointing to the contradiction between the image of Brazil as a place where religious change and plurality occurs with minimal conflict and the painful reality experienced by practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions. Picturing religious intolerance and racism as two faces of the same coin, it argues that both must be resisted. The article concludes with a call for a religious-racial literacy which is intercultural in nature and promises a path to overcome the insidious persistence of racism and religious intolerance. Such a way forward, however, demands a de-centering of Brazilian Christianity, despite its religious majority status, in favor of an epistemic humility which gives full consideration to the knowledge, memories, and lived experience of Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners.

Keywords

Brazil – Afro-Brazilian – religious plurality – religious intolerance – racism – Brazilian Christianity

1 Background

The boom of Pentecostalism in Brazil in the past few decades has increasingly become a focus of scholarly investigations, drawing attention to recent religious changes that have taken place in the country (Vital da Cunha 2021). Such studies usually underscore religious change, rupture, and plurality, while considering the shift from a hegemonically Catholic society to a religiously diverse one.¹ In 1940, 95.2 percent of all Brazilians identified as Catholics. That number drastically declined to 73.7 percent in 2000 and only 64.6 in 2010. By contrast, all Protestants together counted for 2.6 of the Brazilian population in 1940, 15 percent in 2000, and 22.2 percent in 2010. Approximately 18.5 percent of those 22.2 percent are Pentecostals (Campos 2008; Engler & Schmidt 2016).

According to these numbers, it is almost inevitable to conclude that the Brazilian religious landscape has become increasingly plural and complex, and that the attention given to the boom of Pentecostal Christians is warranted. In the past two decades, Evangelicals and Pentecostals have experienced more than numerical expansion, taking on more visible public roles, electing large numbers of public officials, gaining significant space in the mainstream media, and spreading an increasingly recognizable evangelical culture. This picture, however, is not exhaustive. Despite the drastic change Brazilian Christianity has experienced in its intra-religious dimension, one fact persists and deserves attention. Brazil is almost as Christian today as it was a hundred years ago. As Leonildo Campos (2008) pointed out, “Christians were 97.8 percent in 1940 and in 2000 they were only 8.6 percentage points lower.”² In other words, Brazil remains a largely Christian majority. This fact, often overlooked in conversations about Brazilian religious plurality, is especially significant

- 1 Although I elaborate on the limitations to this depiction of the Brazilian religious reality here, in the course of this article it will become clear that the view of colonial and imperial Brazil as a Catholic hegemonic society is not good enough. It overlooks the variety of responses to evangelization by the colonized subjects, and the fact that both Indigenous and Africans in Brazil never fully relinquished their traditional practices. Their traditional religious practices not only survived colonial violence, but have taken multiple new forms both independently from Christianity and in the ways Christianity itself has been shaped in the country. That influence of indigenous and African-derived religious practices in the shaping of Brazilian Christianity is especially noticeable in the rise of popular Catholicism and its many “hybrid Christian devotions” (Tavarez & Chuchiak 2009:72).
- 2 According to the last Census data available (2010), 87 percent of all Brazilians identify as Christian, 5 percent identify as belonging to another religion, and 8 percent are not affiliated with any particular religion (Pew Research Center 2013). The recent growth in the number of Brazilians identifying as religiously unaffiliated also deserves attention. For more information on that phenomenon, see Camurça (2017).

for non-Christians who, regardless of whether they are before a Catholic or Protestant majority (or a combination thereof), continue to be marginalized and to experience religious intolerance.

2 Introduction

While acknowledging the increasing diversity of Christian churches in Brazil, and the need to attend to contextual nuances across the country, this article examines the persistence of religious intolerance experienced by the practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions, the sector of the Brazilian population it affects the most. Drawing on recent reports and historical resources on religious intolerance, I approach the reality of religious diversity in Brazil from a decolonial perspective, pointing to the contradiction between the image some scholars have painted of Brazil as a place where religious change and plurality take shape with minimal conflict and the painful reality experienced by the practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions. In Brazil, religious intolerance and racism are two faces of the same coin. Consequently, they must be resisted and repelled together.

Brazilian Christianity has always been racially diverse. While popular Catholicism and Pentecostalism can boast of a majority of Black and Brown practitioners (Oliveira 2004; Hoornaert 1991), this fact does not erase the contrasting epistemic and ontological reality in which most Brazilian Christian institutions and theologies function as part of a racialized power dynamic that stands in continuity with the colonial project; which in its turn was inherently Eurocentric and Christian. As part of that picture, this author sees White supremacy and Christian superiority as interwoven components of the colonial matrix of power which perpetrate racism (Mignolo 2005: Kindle Location 380). Therefore, one can speak of religious intolerance in Brazil in connection with race and racism, or as religious racism.

In what follows, I will examine contrasting views of religious plurality, explaining why the paradox of those two descriptions combined creates a more accurate picture of the relationship between religious and racial identity in Brazil. Using a decolonial approach, this article advances an historiographical exercise that reexamines narratives, highlighting voices and perspectives often silenced in Brazilian Christian discourse; (i.e., those of non-Christian Black and indigenous subjects). As Nelson Maldonado-Torres reminds us, “The Decolonial Turn is about making visible the invisible and about analyzing the mechanisms that produce such invisibility or distorted visibility in light of a large stock of ideas that must necessarily include the critical reflections of the

‘invisible people themselves’” (2007:262). The article concludes with a call for a religious-racial literacy which is intercultural in nature and which provides a means to overcome the insidious persistence of racism and religious intolerance in Brazil. This approach, however, demands a de-centering of Christianity, despite its religious majority status, in favor of an epistemic humility which gives full consideration to contributions offered by knowledge, memories, and lived experience of indigenous and Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners.

3 The Ambiguous Tale of Religious Change and Religious Freedom in Brazil

The religious monopoly of Roman Catholicism in Brazil was consolidated after the expulsion of the Calvinist Dutch in the first half of the seventeenth century. This monopoly was essentially controlled by the religious orders, leading to a long period of expansion which strongly determined the religious life of the colony. Despite the enforcement of Catholicism, other religious practices – those of European merchants, enslaved Africans, and Amerindians – survived colonization, even if in constricted and marginal ways. In the process of resignifying their own existence and beliefs in that new imposed reality, these colonized subjects never completely lost their agency. They ended up contributing to the diversification of Catholic Christianity by developing hybrid devotions that blended elements of their religious traditions into Catholic symbols and practices. Yet, Brazil remained a Catholic land throughout the colonial period.

Independence from Portugal in 1822 brought a new era of internal conflicts and external competition to the Brazilian Catholic Church. Co-existence between the new Brazilian state and the Holy See was tumultuous due to the Brazilian monarch's efforts to subjugate the Brazilian Church to the interests of the monarchy; – a move the Vatican did not welcome especially as the monarchy leaned towards liberalism. While the proclamation of the Republic at the end of the nineteenth century represented a victory for the theses of the Enlightenment among the Brazilian elites, paradoxically the Brazilian Catholic Church was a proponent of Vatican I and its reaction against liberalism. As a result, the first half of the 20th century saw the development of a conservative Catholic movement committed to regain its lost public prominence.

The Napoleonic wars forced the Portuguese royal family to flee to Brazil in 1808 and subsequently sign a Treaty of Alliance, Friendship and Commerce with England. This treaty opened the doors for British citizens living in Portuguese lands to freely practice their faith; a move that represented the first crack in the

religious monopoly of Roman Catholicism in Brazil. The first Anglican services in Brazil took place soon after the treaty was signed in 1810. Swiss immigrants followed suit; establishing a colony in the southern part of Brazil in 1819 where they opened a Reformed Protestant Church. In the wake of the Brazilian declaration of independence, the Constitution of 1824 extended those same public rights to other Christian faiths, opening the doors for Protestant missionaries to come to Brazil. Thus, the Foreign Mission Board of the Methodist Church in the United States sent Justin Spaulding as its first missionary to Brazil in 1836. Likewise, the American Bible Society sent Daniel P. Kidder as its missionary to Brazil in the following year.

After the American Civil War, in 1866, thousands of former confederates established themselves in Santa Bárbara, São Paulo, and founded some churches. Those churches would serve as catalysts for the rise of the first Brazilian Protestant churches in the following years. By the end of the nineteenth century, Protestantism was definitely established in Brazil, largely reproducing the denominational differences of the churches that originated them in the United States.

The Constitution of 1891, the first of the Republican Era, cemented the separation of church and state, abolishing the official status of Catholic religion. This Constitution is a landmark for religious diversity in Brazil, being reaffirmed by the elevation of religious freedom to the status of a fundamental right in the democratic constitution of 1989 (Fonseca 2020). In the century between these two constitutions, Pentecostalism arrived in Brazil. That phenomenon played a major role in the reshaping of Brazilian Christianity.

Brazilian Pentecostalism was influenced by the movement of W. J. Seymour on Azuza Street, in Los Angeles, and the ministry of W. H. Durham, in Chicago. The first Pentecostal missionary sent to Brazil, Luigi Francesco, left Chicago in 1910, to live among Italian immigrants in the city of São Paulo. In that same year, he founded the Pentecostal church *Congregação Cristã do Brasil*. Swedish missionaries, Daniel Berg and Gunnar Vingren, also came from Chicago, starting their Pentecostal activities in a Baptist church in Pará, which gave birth to the Apostolic Faith Mission, after a split in 1911. As this mission expanded to other states, it changed its name to the Assemblies of God, which in the course of a century became the largest Brazilian Protestant denomination.

A new wave of Pentecostal churches emerged in the 1950s, emphasizing healing, exorcism, and mass evangelism. Those second-wave Pentecostal churches include the Foursquare Gospel Church, the “Brazil For Christ” Church, founded by Manoel de Mello in 1956, and the “God is Love” Church, founded by David Miranda in 1962. In the 1960s, many so-called historical Protestants experienced charismatic renewal, a process of ‘pentecostalization’

which divided basically all Protestant denominations in Brazil. In the 1970s, there was a third Pentecostal wave, emphasizing prosperity theology and spiritual warfare. While numerous neo-Pentecostal churches have emerged in the wake of this third wave, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, founded by Edir Macedo in 1977, is its main representative.

The meteoric growth of these neo-Pentecostal churches brought greater visibility to the non-Catholic Christian field in Brazil. Their aggressive entrance into the political sphere by overtly supporting political candidates committed to defend the churches' interests, and the concerted use of media to create a Pentecostal culture in the country are distinct characteristics, becoming hallmarks of a new Protestant era.

This rise of plurality and change in the Brazilian religious scene in the past fifty years has led some scholars, particularly in the United States and in the United Kingdom, to see Brazil as a promising example of a country that moved from religious hegemony to religious plurality with relative ease; and whose laws are protective of freedom of religion and belief. Brian Grim, President of the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation, depicted Brazil as a lesson to be followed among other experiences of religious change. As he underscores, "The high level of religious freedom in Brazil is notable as the country arguably undergoes one of the most dynamic religious shifts in the world today, with no religious or sectarian conflict" (Grim 2016). He rates Brazil as having the lowest legal restrictions on religious freedom among the 26 most populous countries (Grim 2016). While there are reasons for celebration in the evolution of Brazilian law in respect to acknowledging religious plurality and protecting religious freedom in the past two centuries, such a positive assessment does not show the full picture of the Brazilian religious landscape. Grim bases his assessment on the lack of "legal restrictions" to religious practice in Brazil. On that level, his assessment is generally correct. However, it is on the level of "social restrictions," (i.e., cases of religious intolerance perpetrated not by the state, but by competing social and religious groups), that he is actually far off target (Grim & Finke 2011). As a result, Grim does not seem to take the Afro-Brazilian experience with religious intolerance seriously enough in his analysis.

In 2016, the Report on Religious Intolerance and Violence in Brazil (RIVIR) documented 965 cases of religious discrimination, intolerance, and violence in the country between 2011 and 2015 (Fonseca 2020:95). Similarly, the section on Brazil of the 2020 International Religious Freedom Report includes media reports of threat of violence by a military officer against an Afro-Brazilian religious community, derogatory statements by civil authorities against Candomblé, a court battle to remove a twelve-year-old girl from her mother

because she supported her daughter's choice to practice Candomblé, and multiple discriminatory public remarks against religious minorities by high-ranking government officials.³

An emblematic and shocking case occurred in June of 2015, when an eleven-year-old girl and her mother were attacked as they left a Candomblé terreiro dressed in their white religious robes (Santos & Gino 2016). In addition to the derogatory words shouted at them, including threats of "burning in hell," they were physically attacked by a rock-throwing mob. The image of that eleven-year-old girl bathed in blood while dressed in a white robe stamped the front page of many newspapers around the country.

While the growth of religious diversity in Brazil is an undeniable fact, religious intolerance and violence also increased in the past decade. As Alexandre Fonseca notes, cases of religious intolerance "doubled between 2012 (154 cases) and 2015 (313 cases)" (2020:106). Furthermore, it is clear in these reports that African-derived religions are disproportionately the target of religious intolerance and violence. In collaboration with Mariana Gino, historian Carlos Alberto Ivanir dos Santos draws attention to the fact that more than 70 percent of almost 1,000 cases of religious intolerance in Rio de Janeiro between 2011 and 2015 targeted African-derived religions (Santos & Gino 2016). A report from the Center for the Promotion of Religious Freedom and Human Rights (CEPLIR) based in Rio de Janeiro confirmed their findings: "Complaints of crimes against Afro-Brazilian religions accounted for 71.15% of cases in the last four years. However, in 2015, from September to December, 32% of the cases of intolerance reported were against Muslims, followed by 30% against Candomblecists, indigenous people (6%), agnostics (5%), pagans (3%) and Kardecists (3%)" (Villela, 2016).

As these reports confirm, there is an undeniable connection between racism and religious intolerance in Brazil. Most of these attacks against Afro-Brazilian religions and their sacred spaces are perpetrated by self-proclaimed Christians. One of the most consequential cases of religious intolerance in Brazil took place in 2000, in Salvador, Bahia. Iyalorixá Gildásia dos Santos, known as Mãe Gilda de Ogum, died of a heart attack following an aggression motivated by religious intolerance (Duarte de Souza 2020). Her Candomblé house was invaded and depredated by self-proclaimed Evangelicals with Bible in hand. Two months later, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God published her photo with a stripe on the face and a headline falsely associating her with charlatanism in

3 For the complete report, see 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Brazil. Office of International Religions Freedom, May 12, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/brazil/>, accessed on July 12, 2021.

its newspaper. Seven years later, president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva instituted January 21, the day of her passing, as the National Day to Combat Religious Intolerance in honor of the revered Iyalorixá.

Organizations like *Koinonia: Presença Ecumênica e Serviço* have denounced the religious intolerance that killed Mãe Gilda and continues to impact the lives of practitioners of African-derived religions in Brazil as “one of the different faces of structural racism present in the country,” or simply as “religious racism.”⁴ Data from *Dial 100*, a call service provided by the Brazilian government to make it easier for people to denounce acts of religious violence and intolerance demonstrates that “just in the first half of 2019 there was a 56% increase in allegations of religious intolerance, compared to 2018” (Duarte de Souza 2020). Most of the 354 denouncing calls during that period came from Candomblé and Umbanda practitioners.

Christian institutions and theology – both Catholic and Protestant – have played a role in the long process of racialization and cultural assimilation which, among other things, portrays indigenous and Afro-Brazilian religious practices and worldviews as inferior to Christianity which is implicitly perceived as a Western, white religion. While it would be inaccurate to conceive Christianity, without qualification, as a white people’s religion, it is important to acknowledge that Western Christianity contributed to advance the racialized hierarchization of Brazilian society. Such a societal arrangement is reminiscent of the colonial world and continues to inform the power structures around which Brazilian society organizes itself. The paradox between laws that protect religious plurality and the concomitant growth of religious tensions and conflicts – which particularly target African-derived religious traditions – challenges us to re-examine relations between religion and race in search for possible ways to overcome religious racism.

4 Racial Justice and Black Agency

Due to its role in the transatlantic slave trade, Brazil is the world’s largest center of a multiethnic African diaspora, which has contributed to the shaping of Brazilian culture and society in multiple ways. In contrast to the myth of racial democracy that the Brazilian elites disseminated in the first half of the twentieth century – idealizing the encounter between European, African, and Indigenous peoples in the Brazilian context – the reality of those encounters is tainted by inherent disparities of power and wealth, structural violence, and

4 See <https://kn.org.br/noticias/21-anos-21-janeiro-mae-gilda/7934>, accessed on July 12, 2021.

the enduring and deadly impact of white supremacy. Properly understanding these racial dynamics is critical for any possible healing.

Religious diversity and the racial makeup of Brazil must be examined together (Engler & Schmidt 2016:6). The city of Salvador, Brazil, where I was born and raised, presents an example of the ethno-racial diversity at play in Brazil, and how it is manifested through the lenses of religious diversity. Umberto Eco once referred to Salvador, a major center of Candomblé, as “the Black Rome,” not only because of its 365 historic Catholic churches standing out “against the line of the hills,” but especially because some of these are “churches where the gods of the African pantheon are honored” (Eco 1988:169).

With 80 percent of its population identifying as Black or Brown, Salvador is a microcosm of Brazil, a country where over 50 percent of its 213 million population are Black and Brown.

Approximately 5 million Africans were forcibly taken to Brazil during the transatlantic slave trade, “over ten times as many as [those who] went to mainland North America and almost as many as the total number who went to the entire Caribbean and North America combined” (Kananoja 2012:4). One can well say that Brazil is a Black-majority country with a painful memory of three centuries of African enslavement (the longest in the history of modern slavery) and five of continuous genocide of its Black and Brown people. This is what Steven Engler and Bettina Schmid call the “long shadow of slavery” (2016:2).⁵

The long history of racialized injustice continues to impact the life of Black and Brown Brazilians in multiple ways. According to the 2020 *Atlas of Violence* produced by the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA), “One of the main expressions of racial inequalities existing in Brazil is the strong concentration of rates of lethal violence in the Black population.” In 2018 alone, Black Brazilians “accounted for 75.7% of all homicide victims.” Comparatively, “for every non-Black individual killed in 2018, 2.7 Blacks were killed” (IPEA 2020:46).

Physical violence against Black bodies is often the consequence of epistemic and ontological violence. Thus, the passing of Law 10.639/03, which established mandatory teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African history and cultures in basic education, was an important step in the direction of combating racialized violence (see Candau 2020). Luiz Fernandes de Oliveira (2020:17) suggests that to fight racism effectively, a “permanent insurgency in the Brazilian educational reality” is needed. While Oliveira is right in seeing the demand for an epistemic and political antiracist insurgency, and in highlighting the importance

5 Such remarkable numbers make Brazil’s complex racial diversity and history in the transatlantic slave trade an important focal point for any wider transatlantic discussion. In other words, anyone concerned with race/religion/mission studies needs to take account of Brazil.

of a decolonial and antiracist education; he neglects the breadth of spaces where cultural formation takes place, especially the role of religious temples and communities in that process. Since, as we have noted, religious intolerance and racism go hand-in-hand – resulting from the same colonial matrix of power – the combating of racism demands a broader process of racial and religious literacy (Barreto forthcoming).

After the abolition of slavery in 1888 the racialized conditions of oppression continued in place although under new disguises. As Ricardo Westin notices, “Black-skinned people were able to leave servitude, but they did not receive the instruments necessary to go about their own lives with dignity. They didn’t get land or school, although parliamentarians presented bills in this regard. Nor did plans to indemnify them for their years of captivity prosper. They were even restricted in terms of work. For the coffee plantations and the first industries, the government preferred to encourage the immigration of workers from Europe and Asia” (Westin 2020).

While no reparations were provided for freed Afro-Brazilians, some “slave owners” even felt they “were entitled to compensation for the loss of workers” (Schwarcz & Starling 2018:335). From the standpoint of those in power, dealing with the consequences of the abolition of slavery for the Brazilian state and its elites was the first priority; – not the future of the large number of those freed from slavery.⁶ In fact, the large number of African descendants in the free Brazilian population gave pause to many, leading authorities to look for possible ‘solutions’ to what was perceived as a problem. Brazilian historians Lilia Schwarcz and Heloisa Maria Murgel Starling convincingly argue that one of the reasons behind the government policy to finance European immigration was the need to ‘whiten’ the population, something that was perceived to be “beneficial for the country.” The fear among Brazilian elites about “the ‘future of a country of mixed races’” had existed for some time and is well-documented (Schwarcz & Starling 2018:305, 306).⁷

Brazilian elites imagined Brazil as a predominantly White nation, and feared the potential Africanization of the country. One dimension of Africanization feared by the elites was religious in nature. Such fears were reinforced by the fact that the Afro-Brazilians had recreated African “traditions and cults under the adverse conditions of slavery” (Schwarcz & Starling 2018:80).

6 According to the 1872 census, 16 years prior to the abolition of slavery, 15 percent of the Brazilian population was constituted of enslaved Africans, and 58 percent of all Brazilians were Black or Brown (Campos 2015).

7 As Schwarcz & Starling state, “with slaves [being] still a majority, the old fears of a Haitian-style revolution had not been laid to rest” (2018:306).

The enslaved Africans who came to Brazil belonged to distinct ethnic groups in Central Africa. A larger number of them came from Benin; thus their important contribution to the formation of the influential branch of Candomblé Ketu. In addition, multiple Candomblé traditions emerged along with other Afro-Brazilian religions; and those religions “originated in traditional African beliefs and practices brought to Brazil by enslaved people” (Engler & Brito 2016:142).

While African traditions and local languages combined in the formation of Afro-Brazilian religions; over time those traditions also incorporated elements from both indigenous traditions and Catholicism giving rise to regionalized Afro-Brazilian religions. These ongoing encounters of multiple African traditions gave birth to Brazil’s complex and plural religious reality. And even though almost 90 percent of all Brazilians continue to identify as Christians, many of them cultivate relations with different forms of African-derived religious traditions.⁸ The impact of this creative reinvention of African religious traditions during centuries of enslavement, and the subsequent bricolage of such traditions with other religions, including Christianity, are not only at the root of the contemporary plural Brazilian religious landscape, but also explain how racialized fears have also contributed to the demonization of African-derived religions, and the continuous discrimination against them.

5 The Whitening of Brazilian Society

After 1888, Brazilians of African descent continued to be pushed to the political and economic margins of society. Their traditions, values, and ways of living were often treated with prejudice. Although different from the segregationist systems that formed in the United States and South Africa, the Brazilian republican society was deeply imbued with racism. Since the inception of the republic in 1889, Black Brazilians were perceived as an obstacle for the progress of the nation. As Thomas E. Skidmore (1992) shows, “racial endogamy and segregation were practical impossibilities” as policies, due to the high numbers of people of mixed blood who were already part of the Brazilian free society. Thus, an assimilationist approach to race was undertaken. This approach is often referred to as “whitening.” Assimilationism is not a kinder sort of racism. On the contrary, it equally affirms a “doctrine of innate white superiority.”

8 According with Bettina E. Schmidt (2016), it is estimated that “5–20 percent of Brazilians (approximately 30 million) practice Umbanda or one of the other Afro-Brazilian religions.”

Assimilationism was Brazil's predominant racial ideology throughout the 20th century.

The whitening of the Brazilian society took place mainly through the strategy of miscegenation. Instead of emphasizing blood purity, Brazilian society developed a form of pigmentocracy (Telles 2014) where the lighter skinned and wealthier strata of the population began to pass for white. In that assimilationist world, cultural elements that testified to the African influence on Brazilian culture and society continued to be debased and replaced with elements that brought them closer to the European influence. Only those informed by European taste were considered cultured. European languages, art, and literature were associated with a higher culture and the ideal of progress. Abdias Nascimento, a prominent Black Brazilian intellectual, was one of the loudest 20th century voices denouncing the whitening of Brazilian society and the consequent debasing of Afro-Brazilian culture, morals, religion, and demographics as a politics of extermination, which he intentionally called "the genocide of Black Brazilians" (2016 [1978]).

Nascimento was fully aware of the systemic nature of racism and how it was set to erase Brazilian Blackness – both culturally and demographically – thus, he denounced the politics of wasting Black and Brown bodies put in motion by Brazilian elites.⁹ Genocide, the concept he chose to launch his protest, is a word that speaks to the daily experience of many Brazilian Black communities in very concrete ways (Soares & Borges 2004). By choosing that word, Nascimento linked the continuous waste of Black bodies in Brazil to systemic racism. One of the reasons why his work stood out from others was his insistence in showing that the genocidal racism he referred to remained operative *after the abolition of slavery* (italics mine), threatening the survival of Afro-Brazilians. Freed from formal slavery, millions of Black Brazilians continued to be pushed to the bottom of a class-based society. Not by coincidence, they became the majority of the unemployed, took lower-paying jobs, and disproportionally populated morbid Brazilian prisons.

Even worse, Nascimento notes, were the moral and cultural forms of genocide that followed, with significant economic and demographic implications (Ramos 2019). For him, the genocide of the Black Brazilian population is above all a "discursive effort" aimed at "the erasure of the Black element in the Brazilian population in order to whiten the country" (Ramos 2019).¹⁰ Religion

9 See Afe Adogame's insights on the politics of wasting African immigrant bodies in Europe (2017:166–167).

10 A similar politics of extinction has targeted the Brazilian indigenous population. According to the Conselho Indigenista Missionario (CIMI), more than 1470 indigenous

has unquestionably been an important element in the genocidal process of cultural assimilation. Whether through peaceful or coercive means, Christian evangelization was central for the formation of a racially hierarchized society in the colonial era. In fact, Christian and White identities blended in the notion of a supposedly superior path.

The arrival of Protestant missionaries in the 19th century did not change that Eurocentric mindset that saw indigenous and African-derived religions as inferior and superstitious. On the contrary, Protestantism added another layer to the existing hierarchy by arguing that Catholics failed to evangelize the ‘pagans,’ corrupting the gospel with syncretism. Now it was not enough to convert pagans to Christianity, but rather to turn them into the right kind of Christian. Protestantism had placed itself on the very top of the scale of purity and progress. Both Catholic and Protestant Christians understood their version of Christianity as the measure over against which other religious traditions should be compared and in relation to which they would always come short. While this is crucial to understand ecumenical and inter-religious relations in the Brazilian context, such a mindset is not uniquely Brazilian. It stems from a broader epistemic and ontological framework, which gave birth to an international racialized order.

6 Understanding the Framework

Ramon Grosfoguel defines racism as “a hierarchy of superiority/inferiority along the line of the human,” which “can be constructed in marked in diverse ways.” According to him, “depending on the local/colonial history, those considered ‘inferior’ below the line of the human can be defined or marked along religious, ethnic, cultural or color lines” (2016:10). This racial hierarchization of the world emerged in connection with the rise of a new world order where European imperial expansionism allowed Europe to reposition itself as the self-proclaimed center of an emerging world system. In other words, the modern world which dawned at the turn of the sixteenth century carried “with it the myth of a special kind of sacrificial violence which eventually eclipsed whatever was non-European” (Dussel 1995:10).

The new global order, formed along colonial lines, gave birth to a matrix of power that “ranked human beings in a top-down scale, assuming the ideals of Western Christians as the criteria and measuring stick for the

peoples have gone extinct in the last 500 years. Information available at <https://cimi.org.br/2004/09/22194/>, accessed on July 14, 2021.

ranking” (Mignolo 2005: location 383). The scale used for that ranking was both Eurocentric and Christian – i.e., based on western Christian values and ideals. In other words, colonial Christianity saw itself and the world around it through geopolitical and racialized lenses. From the perspective of the colonial enterprise, Christianity was indeed a western religion destined to become a world religion through the work of western missionaries. The perception of the indigenous peoples in the new world as modern barbarians to be civilized stemmed from an emerging racialized worldview. As Mignolo explains, “[Such classification] was racial because it ranked human beings in a top-down scale assuming the ideals of Western Christians as the criteria and measuring stick for the ranking. Racialization does not simply say, ‘you are Black or Indian, therefore you are inferior.’ Rather, it says, ‘you are not like me therefore you are inferior,’ which in the Christian scale of humanity meant Indians in America and Blacks in Africa were inferior” (Mignolo 2005: Kindle Locations 382–385). Such a racialization of the other was “applied not only to people, but to language, religions, knowledge, countries, and continents as well” (Mignolo 2005: Kindle Locations 378–379).¹¹

Brazilian society and its social hierarchies have been structured through the lenses of the colonial matrix of power. In its hierarchization, the European – commonly redefined as white – was placed on the top of the scale as the norm, along with their language, culture, and religion. Indigenous and African-derived bodies, cultures, and worldviews were perceived as lacking and in need of being civilized. White superiority became the norm (Quijano 2000:534). As part of Latin America, Brazil was one of the first to codify “the differences between conquerors and conquered based on the idea of race” (Quijano 2000:533).

While this colonial matrix of power was key in shaping the colonial administrations, it has outlived them. “Non-European people are still living under crude European/Euro-American exploitation and domination” (Grosfoguel 2007:219). Understanding the coloniality of power and how it works is key to overcoming it. Most late-twentieth-century liberationist movements worked with reduced political-economic paradigms that overlooked the multidimensionality of the colonial matrix of power; in particular, its epistemic dimension. They missed the transfiguration of coloniality in post-independence contexts, where “the ‘colonial’ axis between Europeans/Euro-Americans and

11 Grosfoguel similarly affirms that “Depending on the different colonial histories in diverse regions of the world, the hierarchy of superiority/inferiority along the lines of the human can be constructed through diverse racial markers.” Therefore, “Racism can be marked by color, ethnicity, language, culture and/or religion” (2010:10).

non-Europeans is inscribed not only in relation to exploitation (between capital and labor) and domination (between metropolitan and peripheral states), but in the production of subjectivities and knowledge" (Grosfoguel 2007:223).

Whereas the colonial matrix of power is constituted of multiple hierarchies along the lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, and nationality, this article focuses mainly on the connection between its racial and religious dimensions. Acknowledging that such a colonial racial/ethnic hierarchy "privileges European people over non-European people," it understands also that its accompanying spiritual or religious hierarchy "privileges Christians over non-Christian/non-Western spiritualities" (Grosfoguel 2007:216). Therefore, it makes sense to speak of religious racism in the discussion of religious intolerance targeting African-derived and indigenous religious practices in Brazil.

7 The New Face of Religious Racism

The religious changes highlighted in the beginning of this article led to the rise of a powerful Evangelical/Pentecostal caucus in the Brazilian congress, and the election of numerous Evangelicals/Pentecostals for executive offices. Marcelo Crivella, a bishop at IURD, became the mayor of the second largest city in Brazil, Rio de Janeiro, in 2016. In the 2018 federal elections, 84 candidates who identified with the demands, beliefs and convictions of the Evangelical Caucus were elected, or re-elected to the Lower Chamber of the Brazilian Congress, increasing the Evangelical presence in that governmental body by 9 new seats.

These politicians represent an Evangelical conservative political project which advances an agenda that portrays Christianity as superior over other religions; reinforcing religious prejudice against Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous religions. This project received a significant boost with the election of Jair Messias Bolsonaro as president of Brazil in 2018. Using the phrase, "Brazil above all and God above everyone" as his campaign slogan, Bolsonaro embodies a sort of Christian nationalism which aggressively affirms both White and Christian superiority. Since his election, he has filled his cabinets with Evangelical ministers and recently appointed Presbyterian pastor, Andre Mendonca, to be the first Evangelical member of the Brazilian Supreme Court; – an appointment that is yet to be confirmed by the senate. While Brazilian Evangelicals and Pentecostals exist in all forms and shapes, it is undeniable that a significant number of its most public faces do not represent ideological change, but continuity. Likewise, once epic adversaries, conservative Catholics and Evangelicals have since formed alliances to advance this political project that unashamedly

promotes the superiority of the Judeo-Christian civilization and defends it against other religions and cultures.

Thus, a narrative of religious change which focuses only on Evangelical growth and public rise is insufficient to understanding the complex dynamics of religion and race in Brazil. It is crucial to bring the larger variety of religious practices in Brazil into the mix (Schmidt & Engler 2016), including the significant number of Brazilians who embrace hybrid religious practices (Ribeiro 2018) and those who claim no religious affiliation (Andrade 2013). A more thorough understanding of Brazil's plural and multifaceted religious landscape today requires serious consideration of five centuries of continuous and varied intercultural encounters.

8 The Invention of Religion and Race

'Religion' and 'race' are both modern categories that only gained currency with the rise of the Eurocentric modern/colonial order. The early use of these categories was key for the hierarchization of the modern/colonial world, which included the 'racialization of religion' and its outcome, 'religious racism.' Understanding how these categories were created and the way they have worked in the modern/colonial world is crucial for overcoming the divisions they helped create and advancing an intercultural framework for the reshaping of Brazilian Christianity through the lenses of decoloniality.

Whereas the motivations for the European invasion of the indigenous world of Abya Yala included commercial interests and imperialistic impulses, the conquest and subsequent colonization of the 'new continent' was a Christian enterprise. At that time, the worldview of both colonizers and colonized was not compartmentalized. There was no clear distinction between religious and secular motives. Service to God and service to the crown were not clearly delineated. The compartmentalization of the world into sacred and secular realms was still incipient. The hierarchization of the world, although incipiently conceived along broadly racialized lines, implied a similar ranking of religious traditions.

In his seminal book, *Before Religion*, Brent Nongbri argues that "no ancient language has a term that really corresponds to what modern people mean when they say 'religion'" (Nongbri 2012:2). Building on the work of scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1991[1963]), Nongbri "noted that terms and concepts corresponding to religion do not appear in the literature of non-Western cultures until after those cultures first encountered European Christians" (Nongbri 2012:2). Taking a step further, Nongbri implies not only

that “the idea of religion as a sphere of life separate from politics, economics, and science is a recent development in European history,” but also that such an idea has been projected outwardly “in space and backwards in time with the result that religion appears now to be a natural and necessary part of our world” (Nongbri 2012:6). This Western Christian understanding of religion was colonially imposed on other realities.

In line with that argument, Shahab Ahmed deftly demonstrates that conceptual western paradigms impressed “themselves powerfully and universally upon non-Europeans as part and parcel of the physical and cognitive condition of Modernity to which they were now subjects – including this notion of religion” (Ahmed 2016:187). Quoting Sarah Thal (2002), Ahmed shows how the idea of religion was introduced, for example, into Japanese and imposed upon Shinto Buddhism “in the 1860s as part of treaties guaranteeing the rights of resident foreigners” (Ahmed 2016:185). Similarly, in India, the translation of dharma as “an equivalent to the English (colonial) term ‘religion,’” and the “‘invention’ of a ‘religion’ called Hinduism” were based on the need to create a category that could be “recognizable to their Christian European colonial masters” rather than on “the fact – historically central to society in India but categorically anomalous to the Modern Western notion of ‘religion’ – of the social relations of the caste system being the primary element constitutive of being a Hindu” (Ahmed 2016:186). Expanding upon the argument, Ahmed states:

This is because in order for a religion to be religion it must be made to correspond to the fullest extent possible to the newly-minted post-Enlightenment European Christian model. In other words, in order to be religion, Shinto, Hinduism, etcetera have to be made, to the extent possible, to map meaningfully onto the structures and terrain of post-Enlightenment Christianity and its spatial and epistemological relationship with the rest of society and polity, rather than to map onto their own structures, terrain, and spatial and epistemological relationships – and if their own terrain proves incongruous with modular “religion,” that incongruity is duly acknowledged but sidestepped in the paramount interest of moving analytically forward.

AHMED 2016:186–187

In other words, the modern/colonial invention of religion created an epistemic subjugation. Religion, an idea invented in modern Christian Europe and replete with Christian assumptions, was imposed on others in the encounters between European missionaries, travelers, and colonial administrators with

other people and societies (Nongbri 2012:10). In these colonial interactions, Indian, African, Japanese, and other “world religions” became conceivable in terms in which they had never thought of themselves (Nongbri 2012:105). In none of those societies, however, did there exist an understanding of religion apart from other spheres of life. Faith, belief, and morals associated with religious confessions, and perceived as the background to an abstract idea of religion – along with the equally abstract concept of the secular – emerged in the context of a fractured Christendom, and an incipient self-understanding of a European identity (Nongbri 2012:12). The period in which such conceptualization took place coincided with the formation of the so-called “new world”, and with it, the shaping of racial hierarchization.

While Nongbri unpacks the process by which religion rose as a modern concept and spread throughout the world as a colonial spatial projection, he does not pay the same amount of attention to race, a concept concomitantly in the make. His discussion of race tends to be subordinated to his unveiling of religion as a modern idea. And, yet, both concepts are connected and both functioned as modern categorizations of subaltern subjects. As Yale Historian Tisa Wenger states, “Race in its modern sense provided a way to manage the disciplinary conundrums of slavery and colonialism. It has been one of the most important ways to organize relations of power in the modern world, indelibly shaping every dimension of American cultural, social, economic, and political life” (Wenger 2017:4).

She conceives race not as a biological or cultural construct “but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans” (Wenger 2017:3). Wenger connects the dots between such an understanding of race and the modern category of religion also used to “subjugate newly encountered peoples around the world” (Wenger 2017:6). It is not a coincidence that, in contrast to the European conquistadores, “the targets of colonial conquest were often said to have no religion or were denigrated for what colonial theorists of religion considered a blindingly superstitious ‘paganism,’ opposed by definition to the modern virtues of freedom and progress” (Wenger 2017:3). Referring to English Protestants in the United States, Wenger demonstrates how their “assertions of racial superiority rested heavily on what they saw as a uniquely free religion,” and on the extent to which those being colonized “identified themselves – in simultaneously racial and religious terms – with the values and virtues of freedom, modernity, and civilization” (Wenger 2017:3). She reminds us that Locke’s distinction between the rights of conscience and the regulation of the body was key “to define religion and race as distinguishable categories of identity,” also underscoring the

connections between “the emerging ideology of religious freedom” and “race-based systems of slavery and settler colonialism in the colonial Atlantic world” (Wenger 2017:9).

Latin American and Latinx decolonial thinkers have offered a contribution to this conversation by locating the birth of the initial discourse that “invent, classify, and subalternize the other” on the frontier of “the modern/colonial world system,” as defined by the Iberian “principle of blood purity” and the “theological debates at the Salamanca School, which defined the position of Indigenous and Africans in the human scale” (Bernadino-Costa & Grosfoguel 2016:18). Furthermore, decolonial thinkers highlight that this frontier or borderland is both a place of imposition of differences and a site of resistance, creativity, and emancipation. Thus, as Joaze Bernadino-Costa & Ramon Grosfoguel remind us, the colonial subjects living on the borders of modernity are not simply passive beings (Bernadino-Costa & Grosfoguel 2016:18.). They are not condemned to be defined or contained by those borders. On the very site where subjugating classifications of difference were formed to otherize them, they found ways to rise as epistemic subjects capable of reinventing modern differences.

This is an important insight for Brazilian Christians who, as borderland subjects, are looking for ways to creatively reinvent themselves in collaboration with people from other religious traditions. The reality of religious intolerance and religious racism in Brazil demonstrates that triumphalist discourses about the boom of global South Christianity do not account for deep complexities in the development of Christianity in places like Brazil. While promising and effervescent Black Christian movements and indigenous theologies have emerged in Brazil since the 1960s bringing new cultural and epistemological perspectives to enrich Christian identity in the region through mutual exchanges with Black and Indigenous ways of being in the world, significant numbers of Brazilian Christians – including many Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and conservative Catholics – have reinforced the practice of religious intolerance, particularly those targeting Afro-Brazilian religions. What I am suggesting is that both faces are constitutive of the reality of Brazilian Christianity and both must be taken seriously.

The colonial/modern matrix of power operates, above all, on the epistemological and ontological levels, in the production of hierarchical difference which makes certain kinds of knowledge and certain ways of being superior to others through an artificial human scale. The challenge before us is to reinvent colonial difference by dismantling the coloniality of power that continues to shape a religiously racialized hierarchization of the Brazilian society.

Considering the centrality of a Western Christian worldview in the formation of that racialized subalternity, it is crucial to dislodge Christianity from the pedestal of coloniality. That seems to be the only realistic path to decolonize Christianity in places like Brazil. In order for that to happen, Christianity has to be approached from the margins, from the experiences of Black and Brown Brazilians who, having been victims of the colonial difference, are turned into decolonial subjects.

9 By Way of Conclusion

Chicana cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa has taught us that the borderland is not only a geographical space, but also an existential space where people are forced (or choose) to live within the *entremedios* (in-between); the cultural, political, epistemological, and ontological edges where they experience dislocation and disorientation (Anzaldúa 2015:81). Colonial subjects live in these existential *entremedios* which reject essentialization. These hybrid subjects trespass various cultures, thinking and existing in an inescapable reality marked by “the lived experience of coloniality and its matrix of power that traverses practically all aspects of life, including the realms of subjectivity, knowledge, being, sexuality, spirituality (including soul-body, spirit-mind, and ancestor-relation), and nature (understood interrelationally as Pachamama)” (Mignolo & Walsh 2018:90). Such a paradoxical place of living and existing enables them to develop new analytic perspectives that challenge the often imposed “presuppositions of Western knowledge and thought” (Ibid.). The subjects who see themselves living and existing from and within these ambiguous spaces become able to see themselves in a non-binary way, moving beyond the lenses of both western rationality and western Christian orthodoxy.

As he denounced the assault on the memory of Black Brazilians by the country’s western structures of domination in the course of five centuries in the strongest terms possible – calling it a genocide – Nascimento did not mince words in his critique of the role of the church in that process. As one should know, that assault on the memory of enslaved Black Africans aims at severing the individual ties with his or her African roots. As a response to that assault on the memory of Black Brazilians, Nascimento proposed a new epistemic framework, *Quilombismo*, an African-Brazilian alternative political project aimed at winning back their memory based on the experience of Black Brazilians who escaped slavery and recreated African communities in Brazil. They not only fought to resist slavery and colonialism but also recreated African ways of being and living in Brazil (Nascimento 1980:141). The assault

on the memory of Black Brazilians denounced by Nascimento took place through the use of “refined techniques of preventing Black Brazilians from being able to identify and actively assume their ethnic, historical and cultural roots” (Nascimento 1980:141.) Quilombism is just a decolonial key which helps us restore lost connections and expand African identity, enacting it interculturally in new frontiers.

A way for Black Christians in Brazil to dislodge the hegemony of White Christianity is to engage with Black intellectual practices like Nascimento’s Quilombism in a concerted effort to reconstruct Christian identity in Afro-Brazilian perspective. In other words, it is not good enough to claim the Blackness of forms of popular Christianity – like Pentecostalism and popular Catholicism – by simply pointing to the number of Black Brazilians who are part of those movements, or by pointing to the ways they integrate African-derived symbols, images, and customs into their rituals and practices. It is imperative to engage Black critical thinking and its critique of colonialism; aiming at Black liberation (Caldeira 2021).

Ronilso Pacheco calls for a Brazilian Black theology that is both decolonial and marginal, reflexive of the locus of enunciation of the subaltern who seek refuge in Jesus, one that is grounded on social relations and forms of presence in the world; which are always on the border (Pacheco 2017:238). Pacheco’s call for an epistemic relocation is grounded on a theological affirmation that locates God among enslaved people. Theological discourses that understand this alternative epistemic location of the Divine offer a counter-hegemonic alternative that empowers “the struggle against the kind of oppression and hatred that make it impossible for the mass of the populations in many parts of the world to become subjects” (Santos 2015:65).

These rising Brazilian Black theologies mediate alternative forms of knowing, while advancing a more symmetric intercultural dialogue with other cultures and knowledge systems, including North Atlantic theologies. By keeping often-marginalized Afro-Brazilian minds and bodies as their main interlocutors – their histories and knowledges, including the traditions of the Orishas – they hold the potential to make important corrections to the distortions of the African experience and religious traditions in Brazil, often filtered through the lens of western Christianity.

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Resumen

Mediante los avances tecnológicos y su democratización, se descubre que la cámara cumple una doble funcionalidad. Es una herramienta profética y misiológica que se utiliza para despertar la conciencia colectiva de una nación desinteresada por la realidad negra y también para ofrecer una contra-narrativa que reoriente a los Estados Unidos a convertirse en una sociedad más racialmente justa. Este trabajo considera unas definiciones de evangelio, misiones y lo profético, y define un marco de cómo la cámara funciona para cada una de las tres. Brevemente investiga el uso de la cámara desde Martin Luther King, Jr. durante el movimiento por los derechos civiles, hasta la cámara del teléfono celular de un ciudadano contemporáneo todos captando la violencia contra los negros. Como veremos, lo que las parábolas de Jesús fueron para su mensaje del reino, el contenido de la cámara, al exponer las realidades de la injusticia racial, ha sido vital para lograr confrontar el status quo y revitalizar a los testigos para tomar medidas positivas.

摘要

本文审查了非洲裔巴西宗教实践者经历到的持续存在的宗教不容忍。利用最近关于宗教不容忍的报告和历史资源，本文从非殖民角度看待巴西的宗教多样性，指出巴西作为一个宗教变革和因多元化而发生很少冲突的地方这样的形象，与非洲裔巴西宗教实践者所经历的痛苦现实之间的矛盾。它把宗教不容忍和种族主义描绘成同一枚硬币的两张脸，认为必须抵制两者。文章最后呼吁开展宗教-种族扫盲，这种扫盲是跨文化性的，并有望为克服种族主义和宗教不容忍的阴险顽固不化开辟道路。然而，这种往前的方向要求巴西基督教，尽管占宗教多数，要取消其中心地位，而要以一种认知上的谦逊，充分考虑非洲裔巴西宗教实践者的知识、记忆和生活经验。