CHAPTER 3

Traditional Popular Catholicism in Brazil

Carlos Alberto Steil

Introduction

Traditional popular Catholicism is a set of socially recognized beliefs and practices shared by a significant number of Catholics, but at arm's length from the ecclesiastical hierarchy and its intellectual cadres. In subjective terms, it can be understood as a particular way that faith is lived by a social group or individual; objectively, it is a religious movement centered on the cult of saints, operating according to a logic of interpersonal relations grounded on a diffuse body of lay religious agents.1

As a religious movement, traditional popular Catholicism is thus defined in contrast to the official system. However, although it is possible to discern some tension between the two in ideological and practical terms, relations are fundamentally complementary. But while it is valuable to retrace the long historical trajectory of this relationship, this current analysis will focus on some of its contemporary aspects.2 In other words, these forms of religious expression will not be taken as successive models but as part of Catholicism's tensed and plural realities, which comprise a multiplicity of religious narratives, practices and rituals. This discussion will therefore underscore the contemporaneity of traditional popular Catholicism, and draw attention to those elements that bear out its power to mobilize multitudes in Brazil.

In this sense, I have chosen to highlight what reaches beyond Catholicism's institutional and ideological influence over Brazilian culture, manifested in affiliations to parochial communities or ecclesial movements. Following Marshall Sahlins (1985), I seek to identify longue durée historical structures in current contemporary Catholicism. To this end, I start by addressing elements from Catholic practice that render these structures particularly visible and which, far from being survivals from the past, are coeval and structuring of a Catholic culture that expresses the ethos of being Brazilian. This articulation of various religious institutions, beliefs, rituals, practices, characters and festivities is not meant to provide a phenomenological account of this religious

---

1 Key references on traditional popular Catholicism in the literature include Ribeiro de Oliveira (1972; 1985), Isambert (1982), Sanchis (1983), and Maués (1995).

2 Historical aspects may be found in the works by Riolando Azzi (1977; 1978; 1994).
TRADITIONAL POPULAR CATHOLICISM

universe. The aim is, rather, to make explicit some of the structures underlying a culture we have made natural by resorting to temporal and spatial models objectified in Brazilian society over five centuries of Catholic dominance.

Religious Time and Space: The Catholic Calendar

Traditional popular Catholicism, understood as a structuring element of Brazilian culture, stands on the two basic pillars of any culture: time and space. As a social construction, time is not posed as a universal *a priori*; neither is it a kind of vacuum in which individuals find themselves at birth. On the contrary, we arrive in this world immersed in time as it is structured by meaning. In this sense, the calendar is one of the most effective tools for incorporating individuals into a particular culture. Beyond conscious choice over the religious and non-religious paths presented to us, we are enveloped in a calendar that continuously evokes the religious imaginary pervading our social and historical experience.

Meaningful time therefore is not free-floating, but is instead attached to places that store memories of previous experiences through myths and stories. These allow us to build a bridge with the past: a perception of continuity in relation to preceding and forthcoming generations. Social time is neither linear nor empty. It is punctuated by special moments related to events of sacred history and the celebration of saints: Christmas, Holy Week, Our Lady Aparecida, and All Souls are all national holidays pregnant with religious meaning for Brazilians. At the same time, these events are actualized in space and incarnated in the sites, sanctuaries and towns where they are ritualized, enacted and experienced by the crowds who attend them each year. In them, devotees renew their faith and their sense of belonging to a grassroots, diffuse Catholic culture which resists the encroachment of disenchantment and secularization.

In 2012, Brazil's federal tourism agency estimated that around 20 million people had been on the move the previous year, drawn to religious events and sanctuaries.³ Their destinations included ancient shrines, founded somewhere between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. Brazil's third-largest catholic pilgrimage (*romaria*), to Our Lady of Penha (established in 1558), takes place every year in the town of Vila Velha, Espírito Santo state, during one week following Easter Sunday. Pilgrimage to Bom Jesus da Lapa (1691), in the Bahia backlands in the country’s Northeast Region, is part of a larger cycle of

---

³ According to data from Brazil’s Ministry of Sports and Tourism (Embratur 2012).