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***Catholic Hierarchy and Afro-Brazilian Religions in the 1970's<sup>1</sup>***  
***The CNBB and the Afro-Brazilian religions in the 1970s***

**Abstract**

This article analyses the publication of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), from the early 1970s, which was re-edited a few years later. The CNBB publication aimed to analyze the reality of the so-called Afro-Brazilian religions. The CNBB document shows the uncertainties of the catholic hierarchy of the time, revealing a period of irresolution, where both the council „*aggiornamento*” and the previously signed positions help to understand the limits of acceptance of the hierarchy to Afro-Brazilian religions.

*Keywords:* African-Brazilian religious; Catholicism, religious discourse.

**T**he goal of this text is to analyze a very important document for the positioning of the catholic hierarchy about the so called Afro-Brazilian religions in the post-conciliar period. This document is a short book published by the Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB), more specifically by its Regional Leste 1, which congregates the archdiocese of Rio de Janeiro and the other dioceses that are there.

The title of the publication is: „*Macumba, cultos afro-brasileiros. Candomblé, umbanda, observações pastorais*”.<sup>2</sup> From the early 1970's, the publication is a document from a period of transition due to the enforcing of norms from the Second Vatican Council. This transition is imbued with capital importance, as we focus on the positioning of the hierarchy about the Afro-Brazilian religious universe.

This preoccupation is analyzed here, taking into account their stalemates, their irresolution, due to a historical moment that next to the „*aggiornamento*” of the council, subsisted condemnatory positions very close to the catholic hierarchy as it related to Umbanda and the other Afro-Brazilian religions.

The bishops from Regional Leste 1 from the CNBB would summon clergymen, social scientists, and even a leader from Umbanda to present their views about the Afro-Brazilian religions, and then they could trace a pastoral plan, adequate to the post-council moment.

The work was so well received that, four years after its publication, there was a

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<sup>1</sup> The research which brought forth this text is part of a bigger Project, financed by the CNPq.

<sup>2</sup> Umbanda: Afro-Brazilian religion that worships spirits, mainly of Black and Native peoples, highly influenced by the Christian reading of Spiritism. Macumba: religious expression that worships the same spirits venerated in Umbanda, without, however, the ethical concern found in it. Candomblé: Afro-Brazilian religion in which the Orixás, the gods of the African ancestry, manifest themselves.

second edition of the same work. In this work came together figures such as the Bishop from Nova Iguaçu, D. Adriano Hypólito (author of the Preface of the first edition), who was extremely engaged in the fight to defend human rights and who was kidnapped and tortured in 1976, as well as a clergyman such as friar Boaventura Kloppenburg, someone who was more concerned with doctrinaire matters and the defense of the orthodoxy.

D. Adriano Hypólito sees the growth of the Afro-Brazilian religions at that moment. D. Adriano's point of view, as well as that of the other religious who collaborate in the work, is, above all, pastoral. The Afro-Brazilian Religions and their growth represent a reality which cannot be ignored.

It is necessary to find means for the actions of the church to revert that situation. That is a consensual opinion among the religious in the book. What colors their positions is more specifically the means on which the pastoral deeds of the church must rely in that conjuncture. It was also a consensus among the religious that there should be a pastoral adaptation aiming at allowing the church to be more successful in their dealings, especially with the poor and the marginalized.

It was there that the possibility of a meeting point presented itself, mainly through the liturgy, of the church with the Afro-Brazilian religions, incorporating a familiar language to the symbolic universe of a significant portion of the population.

Already in the Preface to the First Edition he wrote, D. Adriano Hypólito spoke up, recognizing that „faced with the growth of the Afro-Brazilian cults, in special the Umbanda, our attitude must not be one of condemnation, polemics, frustration, but of seriously assessing all our initiatives and methods”

If the liberating message of Christ does not reach the ears of those men who are tortured by the anguish for freedom, what is at fault is not the message, but the communication. There is something wrong in the instrument we use. It might be the case that the instrument is not used correctly. It might be the case that the instrument has lost its reason for existing. It might be the case that the messengers speak in an unknown language. It might be the case that the language was alienated in such a way that it lost its congenital effect. Here a serious reflection and revision impose themselves. Man is free to follow his conscience. Accepting the Gospel is a free decision of his will. It is not there, then, that a pastoral revision imposes itself. Where all the responsibility falls on us is in relation to the content and the instrument of liberation: do we herald, in fact, the Christ, the liberator? Do we, in fact, herald the liberation he offers? And then: how, through what means, in what ways do we herald the message of salvation?<sup>3</sup>

For the Catholic Church the years after the Second Vatican Council served for critical reflections, in which the apologetics and the polemics were replaced by dialogue, and the study of the local realities favored their understanding from an empathetic point of view. However, these same years will reveal moments of

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<sup>3</sup> GOMES, D. C. F. (coord.), „Macumba, cultos brasileiros, candomblé, umbanda. Observações pastorais.” Paulinas, São Paulo, 1976. [1972.] 7-8.

inflection, where the „*aggiornamento*” and the dialogue with the modern world and the local cultures will sometimes show their limitations. This seems to be the case in the document now being analyzed.

***Afro-Brazilian Religions: the limits of the apprehension of the Brazilian Catholic Discourse***

The goal of the CNBB publication appears to be essentially pastoral, that is, it is acting upon a reality admittedly marked by the importance of the Afro-Brazilian religions. In this reality, where the publication recognized that a significant amount of the population often visited and valued the Afro-Brazilian cultural universe, how should the Catholic Church mold its evangelizing movement? This seems to be the central issue in the publication. This pastoral movement should start from the knowledge and the valuing of the African cultural heritage in Brazil. That is why the publication includes names outside of the ecclesial institution, such as Edson Carneiro's and Cavalcanti Bandeira's, the latter as Umbanda leader.

The revision work about the pre-conciliar Catholic view is quite explicit in one of the clergymen asked to give their opinions in the work: I am referring to Boaventura Kloppenburg, who was a friar at the time and who since the 1950's produced a polemical literature, attacking both the Afro-Brazilian religions, as well as Spiritism. In post-conciliar days, the opinion of Kloppenburg should have changed and it did indeed. Now, the clergyman tried to find, in light of Vatican II, the meeting points between what he called Macumba and Catholicism. If the Council emphasized the need to put in evidence the common points between Catholicism, the other religions and the cultural multiplicity, friar Boaventura aimed at exactly that in his argumentation. Thus, friar Boaventura stressed the worship and participative dimensions in Umbanda as possible elements to be valued in the Catholic pastoral movement.

Umbanda is a movement essentially towards the liturgy, rites and ceremonies. It is a religion that is truly focused on movement, with little concern for philosophical and doctrinaire problems. That does not mean that there is no doctrine in Umbanda. However, those who go to the Umbanda yards, do not usually go because of doctrinaire or philosophical concerns, but go specially to watch the liturgy, the service, the supplications and prayers that happen in the yards.<sup>4</sup>

The opinions held by friar Boaventura, came, above all, from the studies he had done about the Afro-Brazilian religions, in the south, southeast, and northeast, in the 1950's. In the post-conciliar conjecture of the 1970's, friar Boaventura recognized that it was necessary to have new modes of expression in the Catholic celebrations and that the success of the Afro-Brazilian religions was due in part to a religious people „*unsatisfied*” with the Catholic formalism, the cold reform Protestantism and Kardecist Spiritism.

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<sup>4</sup> GOMES 60.

Considering the extraordinary growth of the umbandist cult in our midst – where it presents itself as the „*religion of Brazil*” – and its curious syncretism of African elements, Amerindian, Catholic and, above all, Spiritist, we have the impression of being in the presence of a phenomenon of violent irruption of religiosity, unsatisfied with the official religious types, rigid and complex such as the way the official Catholicism appears, the pure Protestantism and the Spiritism of Allan Kardec, which did not offer enough expression to the religious needs of our people. Umbanda seems to be a popular protest against religious types that have been imported and are insufficiently adapted to the environment.<sup>5</sup>

Friar Raimundo Cintra, on the other hand, argued that Umbanda, Macumba and Candomblé showed themselves to be authentic religious manifestations. Weakening the arguments that differentiated it from Catholicism (as we shall see further ahead, the phenomenon understood by the religious as syncretism would be the main point that could not be accepted in the Afro-Brazilian religions), friar Raimundo Cintra even argued for a common monotheism and even a possible trinity in the same way as taught by Catholicism.

First I would say it is a cult, a worship to God, because, as it is known, the Afro-Brazilian origin of this cult is monotheist: Olorum is the only God in macumba. And Oxalá is the son of God (which they identify with Christ). And some say there is Ifá (which would be the Holy Spirit). Then there is a set of spirits: the Orixás, which are not gods. There is a great confusion that is made when they say: „*the god of Macumba*”, „*the African gods*”. For example, in the books written by Roger Bastide or Pierre Verger who publish an album „*Les Dieux d'Afrique*”. This expression „*African Gods*” is wrong because the Orixás are not gods, but spirits, messengers of God.<sup>6</sup>

Trying to explain the success of the Afro-Brazilian religions, Friar Raimundo Cintra, as well as friar Boaventura, underscored the ritual richness found in them and the capacity to communicate revealed by them. In a period when the Catholic Church insisted in having greater participation of the laymen in the ecclesiastic life, friar Raimundo Cintra stressed in particular the participative aspect of the Afro-Brazilian religiosity (and also of the Pentecostalism) as an important lesson to be learned by the Catholic:

In fact, the popular penetration is huge; moreover, the same phenomenon happens with the Pentecost and sects of Protestant origin that have a straight language with the people. Therefore, I think that an explanation for this success is, primarily, in the straight communication and in the use of means of expression, the participation in the assemblies. The participation is total. The whole assembly sings, participates in a series of songs and ceremonies. The language is accessible. There is the use of music, of instruments, of rhythms [...] The Babalaôs and the lalorixás has a great sense of adaptation to the environment. They only speak the language and make gestures that are understandable to the people. Well, we know that in popular religiosity people like to have lots of lights and music, of all that is virtuous, of all that shows. The yards are decorated according to the

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<sup>5</sup> GOMES 84.

<sup>6</sup> GOMES 71.

popular taste, abundantly, and the music also helps the people to express their petition or their supplication, and evidently, with atabaques.<sup>7</sup>

Together with friar Boaventura, friar Raimundo Cintra stood for what he named liturgical „*acculturation*” of the Catholic Church, inspired in the communicability of the Afro-Brazilian religions. Thus, according to friar Raimundo Cintra:

Why should we not learn from this to adapt our religious language, our religious ceremonies, our liturgy to the people and the environment, so that in this way, surely, there would be something that corresponded to the popular soul? Such an adaptation undeniably explains the success of the Afro-Brazilian religions as well as that of other sects. I think that we, the Catholics, should examine our conscience, review the ways we address the people, not only in our sermons, but also in our ways of worship, in a way that we answer to many authentic needs of the people.<sup>8</sup>

Although CNBB's opuscle insisted on the necessity of knowing, dialoguing with and learning from the Afro-Brazilian Religions, there was a limit to the extent that it was accepted. There was a limit, as well, for a pastoral work that valued the Afro-Brazilian culture. This limit resided in the word syncretism. We can see that, in the meaning the religious lent to the word syncretism, was a great part of the limitations to accept the Afro-Brazilian religiosity, even in a post-council time. Therefore, at the same time they emphasize proposals of „*acculturation*” of the liturgy, there persisted, in the early 70's, a vigilant attitude so that the Catholic faith would not be corrupted or adulterated. This characteristic is explicit in the work at hand.

Thus, the Jesuit priest Valdeli Carvalho da Costa, had a reading in which the oppositions were highlighted, starting with his negating recognition to any approximation between Christianity and what he called Umbanda. The antagonisms that he presents between Christianity and Umbanda are summarized as follows:

[Umbanda] is a cosmic religion, it worships natural powers, therefore it is not Christian. It only seems to be a kind of Christianity: it talks about the Christ, but understanding Oxalá; talks about saints, but understanding African divinities, personified powers of nature; talks about charity, but in a dimension only of philanthropy, etc.<sup>9</sup>

Against friar Raimundo Cintra, whose field research concluded in favor of Umbanda's religious authenticity and for valuing its abstractions, priest Valdeli Carvalho da Costa, called these abstractions „*pseudo-religious*”: „*The Umbandist interpretation is a primitive and pseudo-religious interpretation of phenomena that psychology and parapsychology try and, in great part, are able to explain.*”<sup>10</sup>

Even though father Valdeli argued for the non-Christian and primitive character of Umbanda, he was still inserted in the post-council ecclesiastic conjecture, which

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<sup>7</sup> GOMES 75.

<sup>8</sup> GOMES 75.

<sup>9</sup> GOMES 81.

<sup>10</sup> GOMES 82.

looked for „*the seeds*” of the Christian revelation or the foreshadowing of these in the non-Christian religions.

We conclude, then: Umbanda, being a cosmic religion, is paganism. We do not deny, however, that paganism is not completely bad and might be, under some aspects, in a primitive stage of preparation to the revelation of the grace of God.<sup>11</sup>

The concomitance between, on the one hand, the valuing of the Afro-Brazilian religions and the efforts to have a dialogue with them that accompanied their post-Council redefinition, and, on the other hand, the holding on to the condemnation of what he read as religious syncretism, is evident in Boaventura Kloppenburg:

Respecting, fomenting, elevating and consummating in Christ all that in Umbanda we found good, we shall not forget, however, the aspects which are not in agreement with the doctrine of the church and must be free from malign corruption. As a matter of fact, Umbanda is not only African tradition, but syncretism. And the Council does not wish to open the doors to syncretism... Syncretism with Kardecist Spiritism lead the Umbandists to the practice of necromancy or evocation of the dead, and the doctrine of reincarnation. The Fetishism (African and Native), which remains almost intact and pure in Umbanda, makes many of its practices into true acts of magic (even in acts of black magic in the yards of Quimbanda).<sup>12</sup>

Friar Boaventura Kloppenburg's stand in regards to religious syncretism, as well as the stand of the other clergymen that wrote in CNBB's opusculum, must be faced, having as a point of reference the conciliar documents and the Papal Magisterium of the time. Though it may be true that Vatican II insisted in the Episcopal collegiality and in the inter-religious dialogue, it is also the case that we are faced with a generation of clergymen and bishops educated in strict obedience to the Primacy of Peter.

Thus, it is perfectly understandable that the stand taken by these clergymen and bishops underscores the Papal Magisterium and the conciliar determinations. An empirical evidence that points this way can be read in the „*Ad Gentes*” decree, by Paul VI, in which the pope indicated the necessary union of the „*young churches*” to the universal church, as well as making clear his disagreement with what he understood as syncretism:

The seed of the word of God, germinating in good soil, watered by the holy dew, absorbs the sap, transforms it and assimilates it to produce abundant fruits. Certainly, in an analogous way to the economy of incarnation, the young churches, with their roots in Christ and built upon the foundation of the Apostles, receive, through a wonderful interchange, all the riches of the nations that were given to Christ as inheritance. They receive from the habits and traditions of their peoples, from the wisdom and doctrine, from the arts and disciplines, all that can contribute to reveal the glory of the creator, illustrate the grace of the Savior, and order, as is convenient, the Christian life. To achieve this goal, it is necessary that in each of the large socio-cultural areas, a theological reflection be stimulated in a

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<sup>11</sup> GOMES 82.

<sup>12</sup> GOMES 87-88.

way that, in light of the tradition of the universal Church, the actions and words revealed by God, consigned in the Sacred Scriptures, and explained by the Fathers of the Church and by the Magisterium, be always investigated anew. Thus, the process of making the faith intelligible will be understood more clearly, taking into account the philosophy or the wisdom of the peoples, the ways the habits, the meaning of life and the social order can agree with a moral manifested by the divine revelation. This way a path to a more profound adaptation in all the extension of the Christian life will be found. All the appearance of syncretism and of false particularism, will thus be excluded, the Christian life will mold itself well to the genius of each culture, the particular traditions and the inherent qualities of each nation, enlightened by the light of the Gospel, shall be taken into the Catholic unity. At last, the new particular churches, enriched by their traditions, will have their place in the ecclesiastic communion, leaving intact the primacy of the cathedra of Peter, which presides over all the assembly of the charity.<sup>13</sup>

Bearing in mind the Papal Magisterium as it relates to the meaning given to the term syncretism it is not surprising that, even in a post-conciliar period, we could read opinions such as those manifested by the Jesuit father and anthropologist Francisco Sparta. This clergyman conducted his speech, which was transformed into the article found in the CNBB book, following the method of the Belgian Catholic Action: the see, judge, and act, which had so much influence in the congenerous Brazilian movement.

In this way, he started with field work, to establish his stand with the help of the social sciences and of psychology and finally come to a pastoral action which was in his view true to the teachings of the church. What is of interest to us, are just these proposals for pastoral action made by father Sparta.

Adhering to the tendency of the other religious that wrote in CNBB's opuscle, the emphasis is in essence liturgical. He proposed a liturgy „to some extent inspired in the molds of the Umbandist cults”<sup>14</sup> or the „revitalization of the old paraliturgies and the creation of new ones, according to the example of the ancient evangelists of our people.”<sup>15</sup> Father Sparta did not believe that Umbanda could represent a real danger to Catholicism, adopting a projective vision. In the future, according to the clergyman, the tendency would be the relenting of the growth of the Afro-Brazilian religions. He based his argument in what he called „law of the religious imperialism.”

The law as religious imperialism makes the religious types become imperial as well.

One is prone to supersede the other, dominate it, absorb it. Catholic and Umbandist types will not be able to remain side by side and imperviable. Moreover, those that believe in ecumenism do not assume conceptual imperviability.<sup>16</sup>

To this „law of the religious imperialism”, father Sparta added a „law of the syncretism.” The tendency towards the religious syncretism was what he saw with explicit caution. While he defended the reinvigoration of the „old paraliturgies”, he

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<sup>13</sup> *DECRETO AD GENTES*. 07/12/1965. Available: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651207\\_ad-gentes\\_po.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_po.html) Accessed: 30/08/2010.

<sup>14</sup> GOMES92.

<sup>15</sup> GOMES92.

<sup>16</sup> GOMES92.

also thought that Catholicism's closer contact with the Afro-Brazilian religions, mainly Umbanda, could not only enrich it, but also corrupt it. The adoption of a liturgy open to the popular sensibility could, in his view, alienate the people and encumber the job of making people aware to that conjecture that was very much valued by the church:

The law of syncretism, or, at least, the tendency towards syncretism (all religions, except Christianity, have accepted it) makes the dominating types become contaminated by the inferior types. *Here is a warning, specially in an ecumenic epoch, that Catholicism, in contact with Spiritism-Umbandism, might be enriched, but also adulterated. (...) We shall not hide, however, the objections to those two solutions, but instead allow for their free discussion.*<sup>17</sup>

*A liturgy with Afro-Native rhythms and dringes might dull still further the awareness that the people should have of its evils, and take away from them the will to fight for a better life and society.*<sup>18</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The reading of CNBB's opusculum helps us understand some of the dilemmas faced by the Brazilian Catholic Church in the post-conciliar period. A large portion of the Brazilian episcopate adopted a critical stand in regards to the military dictatorship and came to the forefront of the denouncing of human rights violations; likewise, a large portion of this episcopate and the national clergy put faith in a social intervention capable of breaking the old alliances the church had with the circles of power, interacting directly with the people. However, there were limits to the acceptance of the axiological universe of a large portion of the Brazilian population.

While a significant portion of this population moved freely through different logics and temporalities, being able to articulate the dominating religion with practices and beliefs judged to be incompatible with the Catholic orthodoxy, the bishops and priests that wrote CNBB's opusculum tried, diligently, to articulate the interreligious dialogue and the „*aggiornamento*” with the official magisterium of the church.

This brings us to an understanding of the limits of the acceptance of this magisterium to local realities judged to be incompatible with the teachings. Although Vatican II insisted on having a „*church of the ministry*,” open to the necessities of the people, the magisterium, together with the authority, continued to be a reality in the heart of Catholicism that was not to be overlooked.

Thus we shall understand the advancements and setbacks in multiple ways, which made CNBB, so explicitly committed to the social-political terrain, publish such a document that was so refractory to the life and the values of a large portion of the Brazilian population.

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<sup>17</sup> Friar Raimundo Cintra's stand contradicted the one that was expounded by Friar Boaventura Kloppenburg, who in 1961 classified Umbanda as polytheist: „*If the Umbandists presented themselves as they really are - sorcerers and polytheists - their followers would be few. As well they know. That is why they hide their wizardry under the Christian cloak of charity and disguise their polytheism with the Christian devotion to saints.*” KLOPPENBURG, B., 1961. 124.

<sup>18</sup> GOMES92.