

DIALOGUING WITH JOEL ROBBINS ABOUT THE “PLURALISM OF VALUES”: REACTIONS AND UNCERTAINTIES

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I consider Joel Robbins' proposal of focusing on the study of pluralism of values and rituals very thought provoking. I confess I am not sure whether I understood all his arguments, but what I believe understood encouraged me to raise some questions. Therefore, I am grateful for the invitation to join this debate, for it has been intellectually fruitful to write the present text, although the result might neither be mature nor systematized. I start my debate comparing Robbins' current text and his proposal of accomplishing an “Anthropology of Christianity”. Next, I present some questions and reflections derived, mainly, from Robbins' discussion about the rituals “Spirit disco” and “pig sacrifice”.

When Robbins in the present paper emphasizes the maintenance of pre-Christian rituals and values among the Urapmin, it appears for me at first that he was departing from his "Anthropology of Christianity" which argues the necessity of highlighting discontinuities and ruptures introduced by Christianity (Robbins, 2003 and other works). However, both works hold a similar methodological strategy, proposing new questions and new focus of analysis. In his “Anthropology of Christianity”, Robbins pointed out that those studies whose focus was on what remained unchanged on people's lives, even after having adopted Christianity, missed understanding Christianity. In a similar way, now he shows that shifting focus from the plurality of religious identities to the plurality of rituals and values will help to better understand religious behaviors and practices. Religious plurality tends to reflect the plurality of social factor and variables, such as class, income, instruction, ethnic origin, among others. Indeed, most of the study on religious pluralism tends to move researchers away from the reflection about religions themselves.

Another issue which seems to be a development of the "anthropology of Christianity" is the presence among Urapmin of a plurality of “super values”. This plurality probably appears only with the adoption of Christianity. So prior to Christianity there might be a plurality of rituals and values, but

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those might be all connected to a unique main “super value”. From what I could understand in the text, pre-Christian rituals would tend to value dependence (interdependence or “relationism”) of people among themselves and nature. Therefore, Christianity would have brought a new system of values that would be against this relationism: individualism. However, it seems the Urapmin's pluralism of values represent a tension between only two systems of values oriented by two respective "super values": relationism and individualism. Would this pluralism be, in fact, a dualism? Or were there other concurrent value systems that were not mentioned in the text?

Nevertheless, the point I believe is not explicit in the text is that these value systems are strongly related to different ontological ones. Indeed, “individualism” and “relationism” are also belief, i.e., a way of defining the human being, of defining the world or the "reality" in general. Certainly, belief and value are extremely interdependent, but they can be differentiated at least for analytical purposes. Important conflicts happen between people that, despite sharing same values, disagree about beliefs.

Ontologies may also be supported by rituals. Rituals express values, as Robbins points out, but they also reinforce or even create and recreate beliefs (ontologies). The practice of collective rituals is the origin of the collectivity itself, as Durkheim (1996) would say. Ritual could also be understood as tools for the “social construction of reality”, as Berger & Luckmann (1978) proposed. So each analyzed ritual is connected to a different ontological system.

I was convinced by Robbins' arguments that two rituals he described - The “Spirit Disko” and “Pig Sacrifice” - support distinct values. I believe that they also support diverse ontologies, however, I could not understand why he said in this presentation that Spirit disko “*is an unusually complete realization of the value of individualism*”. This assertion seems to go on the opposite direction of what he said in Becoming sinners. In this book, Robbins (2004: 306) affirms that “*the very end of a successful Spirit disko is a moment when the Urapmin feel themselves to have achieved a glimpse the kind of a collective salvation that their social experience leads them to seek and to value*”. Despite reinforcing the belief in individual salvation, the “Spirit disko” ritual questions the ability of the individual to be sure of his salvation by himself. Salvation would be individual, but the collectivity would need to confirm it.

Indeed most rituals tend to reinforce collectivity. There is no affinity between individualism and

collective rituals. The “confession” could be a more individualistic ritual, but even so, when the “confession” must be to another human being, and not directly to God, it suggests in a certain degree a reinforcement of “relationism” (as it is found in Catholicism, for instance). Religious groups, such as the historical Reformed Protestant, that believe in (and also value) individual autonomy, reject this kind of confession and have reduced the amount of rituals in general. If Spirit disko does not reinforce individualism what did it? Comparing to pig “sacrifice ritual”, the ritual of “Spirit disko” may reinforce the belief in human salvation and autonomy in relation to nature or pre-Christian gods.

Robbins argues that Urapimin are divided between two systems of values when they opt to perform the pig sacrifice. But as Urapimin Christianity never ontologically denied the power of nature gods or forces, it is possible to propose an alternative hypothesis for the decision to perform this ritual. When a Urapimin person is not healed or cannot heal a child with Christian prayers and healers, they adopt what Weber (2002a) called an "ethics of responsibility", abandoning the "ethics of belief"(or of *conviction*). An ethics of responsibility would mean to give up a certain value from the moral and/or religious sphere of life when making a decision in another sphere of life where the survival (physical or political) would be the issue (in the economic, political sphere, for example). In other words, the Urapimin prefer not to be martyrs or not to martyrize their children and other children for holding Christian values. As much as they may appreciate this value system, or may feel strongly attached to it, they do not want to die for it.

When there is a risk of dying, one may appeal to things that they do not consider correct. Can this be perceived as a tension between different religious value systems or would it be only a tension between distinct "spheres" of life priorities, as Weber (2002b) called them? In spheres where survival is the point, people can adopt behaviors they do not value. When people are confronted with the risk of death, they may not be faithful to what they consider being their values.

In addition, if the ritual of the pig were often performed and if it normally takes place at festive moments, one could assume that this ritual may reflect a positive acceptance of the value or values system which it express. However, this does not happen. Since this ritual occurs only at moments of crisis, its performance may be interpreted as a pragmatic option. In other words, one opts for acting against a religious value in favor of survival. Very few people decide to be a martyr or martyrizing a family member (especially children) in the name of a religious values or principles. The Catholic

Church canonizes those martyrs of the faith and of other Catholic values such as the so-called "martyr for purity" (St. Maria Goretti) (Matos, 2014). Another known case of Catholic sainthood related to adherence to religious value even facing death is of an Italian physician (Gianna Molla) that refused abortion even knowing that the pregnancy could kill her (as it did).

Comparing with my research on Brazilian Pentecostals Evangelicals and Charismatic Catholics an aspect that called my attention is that Robbins argues in this paper and also in his book (Robbins, 2004) that Urapimin feel guilty and sinful when they do pre-Christian ritual such as the pig sacrifice. Robbins does not point to strong fears of the Devil or to the possibility of being enslaved by demons after promoting this ritual. The people I researched mentioned a great fear of demons. When they decided to perform a ritual considered devilish by their church it is because they are normally leaving the church and do not feel guilty about it. On the other hand, some leave the church, but still fear the demons.

As among Urapimin and other contexts of Pentecostal expansion, the conversion to this type of Christianity does not lead Brazilians to question the spirits of their prior tradition. But after conversion to Pentecostalism, people believe that these spirits have much more strength than individuals and are treacherous, deceitful. For them the demons have strong powers that can almost compare to those of the one omnipotent god. Unlike what they used to believe prior to conversion, they argue these demons are not satisfied with exchanges, but they want to enslave people who will be their victims not only in the hereafter, but now, in this world. For this reason, during our research, we found a great fear of demons among Brazilian Pentecostal individuals and also among Charismatic Catholics (Mariz, 1994a,b, 1997, Machado 1996, and Mariz & Machado, 1994, 1996).

From what I understood in Robbins' text, there is no menacing demons for Urapimin. At least, Robbins does not mention any strong fears when the Urapimin decide to perform the rituals of their traditional religiosity. But he mentions the feeling of guilt and the concept of sin. This is an issue which is of great interest for me when studying Brazilian Pentecostal discourse of people who allegedly were freed from alcoholism (Mariz, 1994b) and from "demons" in general. The idea of individual guilt was not present, the individual was perceived as victim of demons. When we (Maria das Dores Machado and I) analyzed the speeches of Pentecostal women regarding their attitudes in relation to family conflicts, we heard constant references to "demoniacal oppressions" of the abusing men, but

also prays for their "liberation" or “deliverance” (Mariz & Machado, 1996). We identify a relationship between the idea of "liberation" and of individual autonomy, but of course, this kind of autonomy is relatively weaker if we compare to those of Urupmin who adopt concepts such as guilt and sin.

This was a rich and deep text. As I explained earlier, I am not sure if I fully understood all its arguments. Even though, what I understood was very intellectually stimulating for me. I really enjoyed the reading as I enjoyed the conference last year!

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