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## SYNCRETISMS AND POPULAR CATHOLICISMS IN PORTUGAL

Contrary to popular conceptions, contemporary Portugal is not a country marked by uniform patterns of religious observance: while urban Portuguese society has adopted many of the secular characteristics which apply across most of Western Europe, rural Portugal is much more traditional in its customs; and, even within the context of rural society, the Northern regions of the country maintain a much higher level of participation in religious observance than the South. The predominant form of religious worship is, of course, Roman Catholicism, in spite of the growth in recent years of the Protestant Churches and the liberalisation of the climate of belief which followed the 1974 Revolution. Nonetheless, the precise forms of religious belief and practice which exist even within Portuguese Roman Catholicism are much more varied than might be imagined.

The present discussion does not take into account the cult of Our Lady of Fátima, which is populist, rather than popular, in nature: in other words, in spite of the significant popularity of this manifestation of the Virgin amongst the Portuguese public, this is a figure whose cult has been, to some extent at least, cultivated by the Church hierarchy (and, to some degree at least, by political authorities) with a view to its dissemination amongst the people. Our Lady of Fátima is, therefore, ultimately an expression of orthodox Roman Catholicism with a superficial overlay of specifically Portuguese characteristics and popular festivities, rather than a genuine creation of the popular mind.

The two principal forms of belief focussed on in the present paper are Cryptojudaism and Popular Catholicism. The latter phenomenon may certainly be labelled a genuinely syncretic practice, in that it involves the simultaneous co-existence of two (if not more) very different forms of belief, while the former might be judged by some commentators to be only superficially syncretic, in the sense that a superstructure of Christian practice has overlaid a deeper, non-Christian core purely as a matter of disguise rather than what might be seen to be the genuinely syncretic practice of simultaneously holding beliefs or engaging in practices from two different belief systems.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Droogers and Greenfield correctly point out that even to talk of familiar categories of belief (such as 'Christianity') as if they were not also themselves ultimately syncretic in origin is inaccurate (Droogers and Greenfield, 31); nonetheless, it would be impossible to deny that in practice widespread behaviour and popular opinion have treated the various major religious traditions as if they were fully autonomous forms of belief. For a wide-ranging theoretical discussion of the possible meanings applied to the term 'syncretism' and the varying values put on it by commentators from a variety of perspectives, see Droogers and Greenfield, 'Recovering and Reconstructing Syncretism', in Greenfield and Droogers (eds.), 21-42.

In reality, however, any such theoretical distinction in nature between these two different phenomena is difficult to sustain, precisely because of the underground nature of Cryptojewish practice. This clandestine character of Cryptojudaism ensures not only that it is difficult for outsiders to establish a reliable perspective on it, but also that its own practitioners are sometimes not entirely clear as to the nature of their own actions: thus, Canelo reports that, while the Cryptojews of Belmonte in the Beira Baixa, are convinced that they are following orthodox Jewish tradition (Canelo, 66), in fact many members of the community are unaware even of the existence of some practices such as circumcision to which mainstream Judaism has attached considerable importance (Canelo, 87). The degree of isolation of this community is further emphasised by Canelo's claim that many of its members are still convinced that they are subject to persecution by the Inquisition, more than two centuries after its abolition (Canelo, 78). Unlike the practice in orthodox Judaism, with its insistence on the teachings of the traditional Rabbi, Canelo reports that the traditions of the faith in Belmonte are passed on from mother to children (Canelo, 87) as part of this climate of secrecy regarding the maintenance of the faith: clearly, therefore, religious practice here has been viewed as a matter for the domestic, rather than the public, sphere. Whatever the superficial origins of the syncretism of Catholicism and Judaism in Portugal, therefore, it seems reasonable to agree with Gerber's judgement that 'over time, a new religion, neither wholly Jewish nor wholly Catholic, evolved among the secret Jews of Portugal. It was a belief that combined secrecy with fear, partial memory with substantial loss' (Gerber, 143).

The survival of this body of beliefs has its roots in the prohibition on Judaism imposed on the Jewish population of Portugal by King Manuel I in 1496; unlike the prohibition placed on Jews in neighbouring Spain (where the intention was very clearly to drive Jews out of the country), in Portugal the intention was to force them to remain within the country because of their contribution to the economy, but to oblige them to become Catholics (Gerber, 142). This led to the enforced mass conversions of Jews carried out in Lisbon in March 1497; D. Manuel was, however, sufficiently pragmatic to recognise the superficiality of this conversion and therefore permitted the community a period of twenty years in which they could give up their faith. However, this concession is widely believed, in fact, to have made it possible for the community to develop strategies for disguising Jewish practice within the context of apparent Catholic orthodoxy which survive to this day (Dias, 15). Thus, Canelo reports practices such as that of entering churches while simultaneously repeating formulae expressing resistance to Christianity rather than acceptance of it (Canelo, 117); in similar fashion, in a fictional context, the short story by Miguel Torga 'Alma-Grande' (first published as recently as 1944) depicts a child responding to questioning during his catechism lessons with a reply which ambiguously fits both Jewish and Christian concepts of the nature of God while avoiding the awkward, but fundamental question of the Trinity (Torga, 15). Similarly, many of the prayers of contemporary Cryptojews reproduced by Canelo (124-66) fit both sets of beliefs, but there is a marked preponderance of references within them to the Old Testament, rather than to the New, although one prayer cited does refer to Christ, God the Father, and Our Lady (Canelo, 154). Rather than being a recognition of Christian claims to

have superseded Judaism, however, the content of this prayer might perhaps be better related to the influence of the 'Divino', that is, the popular Portuguese interpretation of the Trinity, even in communities with no conscious Jewish tradition, as possessing a specifically female element, representing the forces of Creation, a belief which Espírito Santo sees as deriving from Judaic tradition (Espírito Santo: 1988, 109-10); it is noticeable in the prayer alluded to above that it is the Holy Spirit which is the one traditional element of the Christian Trinity which is missing and whose place is taken by Our Lady.

By way of contrast with these matters of internal doctrine, Dias reports that externally verifiable Jewish practices have either largely been abandoned, in the case of circumcision (Dias, 20-21), or disguised: for example, Dias suggests that 'Alheiras' sausages were originally created in order to give the appearance of being made of pork, while actually having chicken, turkey or partridge as their main ingredients (Dias, 24). However, even in these matters, practice is far from uniform: thus, Canelo reproduces an account of a circumcision ceremony carried out in Belmonte as recently as 1929 (Canelo, 167-69). Presumably this would have been possible only because, within this relatively strong and resistant community, where marriage outside the community is viewed negatively (Canelo, 86), the possibility of detection was reduced considerably.

However, the very isolated nature of Cryptojewish communities, which survived almost exclusively in remote and often mountainous areas of the country, such as Trás-os-Montes and the Alto Alentejo, a fact which gave them some protection and a degree of purity over the centuries, has also, in the longer term, contributed to the downfall of the community: thus Canelo comments on the increasing inbreeding and weakening of an essentially inward-looking community (Canelo, 86). Furthermore, Dias reports that this very isolation, combined with the gradual loss of memory of the purpose and nature of many of the practices preserved in secrecy over generations, has led to an inability on the part of many in the Cryptojewish community to associate fully with either Christianity or orthodox Judaism (Dias, 86-87).

It is this lack of awareness of the combined nature of their practices which might be said to render contemporary Cryptojudaism more generally syncretic than is allowed for by commentators who (perhaps for non-academic reasons, such as the promotion of solidarity within a dying community) insist that this form of belief is in reality merely an artifice, even if such dissimulation was the origin of these practices. The essential common doctrinal traditions shared by Christianity and Judaism appear, in fact, to have made it inevitable that there should be a propensity for genuine merging of the two sets of beliefs over the centuries: the close proximity of Hannukah with Christmas and of Passover with Easter, for example, would make it virtually impossible in practice to continue to distinguish between the superficial and the more deep-lying justification for the separation of these festivals. In a similar fashion, even if inhabitants of Cryptojewish communities may be more prone, for example, to bestowing Jewish names such as Sara, Raquel, or Daniel on their children, it is not always clear that they are consciously aware of the significance of such actions (Canelo, 90). Other practices which are also of Jewish origin, such as the voluntary absence of recent mothers from Mass for forty days after

childbirth (Espírito Santo, 1990: 173) or the action of sweeping a room from the doorway inwards (Dias, 21), might now be viewed as being customs preserved out of cultural habit rather than actions deriving from either profound conviction or a desire to resist cultural assimilation by the majority community. Moreover, while Canelo goes out of his way to describe the continuation of visibly Jewish practices such as the preparation of unleavened bread for Passover (Canelo, 105-06), he also acknowledges that celebrations which are purely Christian in origin, such as those held on Ascension Thursday and Corpus Christi, have equally become an integral part of the Cryptojewish calendar in Belmonte, even if these days were originally marked only because members of the community felt obliged to do so for the sake of appearances (Canelo, 111 and 113).

Essentially, this loss of sense of the internal purpose of Cryptojudaism in a more tolerant society, combined with the general secularisation of contemporary Portuguese society, leads Dias to foresee the death of this community as such within the coming generation (Dias, 90); already in 1985 Canelo insisted that Belmonte, in the Beira Baixa, was the last proper crypto-Judaic community in Portugal, with only some two hundred and fifty adherents (Canelo, 55). He, too, predicts the extinction of this community in the foreseeable future (Canelo, 196).

The Popular Catholicism of rural Northern Portugal, on the other hand, involves a much more radical syncretism deriving from two very different sets of beliefs: essentially here the rituals and symbols of the Roman Catholic Church are imbued with added significances deriving from pre-Christian religious practices. This leads to a bewildering array of ceremonies which combine the transcendental aspects of Christianity with immanent practices and beliefs relating to the celebration of the fertility of the soil and of its inhabitants. In spite of the apparent contradictions raised by such an assertion, Catholicism, with its wide range of intercessionary saints and its popular traditions of legends and devotions paid to these figures in all aspects of life, lends itself to such syncretisms in a manner which would be unthinkable for some other forms of Christian practice.

Some of the practices documented in the North of Portugal might be regarded as being indicative of rural superstition rather than of religious practice: thus, Espírito Santo makes mention of baptisms made in the name of the Devil (Espírito Santo, 1990: 169) and devotions to Christian saints made in search of cures for diseases or in an attempt by women to become pregnant, often taking the form of placing waxwork reproductions of parts of the human body in chapels dedicated to the saint in question (Espírito Santo, 1990: 117 and 133). Similarly, legends which equate St. Bartholomew with the Devil (Espírito Santo, 1990: 125) and which require him to be appeased by animal sacrifice (Espírito Santo, 1988: 170), or those which see the role of St. Hilary as being that of deflowering young women who have died as virgins (Espírito Santo, 1990: 120), would have to be regarded as being incompatible with orthodox Catholic belief and must, therefore, be regarded as having their origins outside Christian tradition. Nonetheless, Espírito Santo is adamant that the use of terms such as 'superstition' in this context amounts to little more than a value judgement made by those who would seek to award greater status to their own beliefs than to others' (Espírito Santo, 1990: 17-18).

Espírito Santo emphasises the fundamental association between the northern Portuguese peasant and the soil, which is associated with the figure of the life-giving mother (Espírito Santo, 1990: 97-98). This fits into his vision of the official authority of the father figure (the political state, or the official priest) as being in permanent opposition to the *de facto* control exercised over the priest in a variety of ways by the community itself, which takes on the characteristics of a mother-figure (Espírito Santo, 1990: 191-214); in this sense, therefore, it may be said that, in spite of attempts by the Church to control the behaviour of its flock, it is this independence of spirit which gives popular Portuguese Catholicism its vitality.

One visible aspect of this integration of religious practice with the life of the community lies in the fact that the measurement of time and the passing of the seasons in the North revolve around the cycles of nature (Espírito Santo, 1990: 53), while baptisms are seen as invoking the responsibility of the wider community and not just of the child's biological parents (Espírito Santo, 1990: 171-172). In this sense, therefore, it is the child's functional importance within the community which is celebrated as much as the rite of passage which he/she represents for the parents; similarly, death is often celebrated as much as mourned, since it indicates merely the completion of the natural cycle of life (Espírito Santo, 1990: 177). In this sense customs such as the mock-funeral ceremonies conducted in the North during Lent (which always culminate in the 'dead' man emerging from his coffin) may be viewed in a similar light to the classical legend of Persephone, as expressing the cycle of the seasons and emphasising the survival of the community rather than the orthodox Christian concept of the survival of the individual soul.

Many of the practices and beliefs outlined above are, of course, capable of at least partial reconciliation with orthodox Catholic beliefs and practices. There is, however, some evidence of underlying doctrinal difference, particularly in the vision of God purely as Creator, with no sense of redemption. Thus, Espírito Santo recounts numerous oral narratives of punishment by God, which see human life exclusively in terms of a departure from divine Grace, often expressed in terms of the difficulty inherent in eking a living out of relatively poor conditions (Espírito Santo, 1990: 54); he explicitly relates this to a vision of God held by the ancient Phoenicians (Espírito Santo, 1988: 61-63), which also shares much with the traditional Christian dichotomy between the vengeful, jealous Lord of the Old Testament and the loving God of the New Testament (Canelo's insistence on the underlyingly negative vision of the future in Cryptojewish belief may also be thought to have some significance in this context, although he attributes this fact primarily to centuries of persecution; Canelo, 124). While these narratives of a lost Golden Age clearly derive from a similar source to the legend of Eden in Genesis, there is no hint in this form of popular Catholicism of the recovery of perfection, but rather merely a desire for a symbolic return to the mother's womb: Espírito Santo sees significance in this respect both in the use of the term 'igreja matriz' for the English 'parish church' and in the common design and location of the church, which, he claims, is almost always dominated by curves (associated with the female form) and which generally faces towards the East, representing the origins of life (Espírito Santo, 1990: 87).

The fundamental engagement of Portuguese popular Catholicism with human fertility becomes evident in the plethora of sacred, life-giving rocks, stones and sculptures which exist in the North and to which young women display considerable physical devotion, either in search of a partner or in the hope of becoming pregnant (Espírito Santo, 1990: 31-34). The reproductive overtones of many of these practices sit uneasily with official contemporary Roman Catholic teachings on sexuality, and their origins clearly lie in an era when official regulation of sexuality was not as codified as it has become in the modern era. This interpretation of such practices as being pre-Christian in nature is strengthened by a comparison of them with traditions in other parts of Europe: the very conception of the well-known novel *A Jangada de Pedra* by José Saramago is, in fact, dependent on fertility-related legends current not only in the Iberian Peninsula, but also in various parts of northern and western Europe. Past contacts with Celtic and Viking peoples and traces of these civilisations (demonstrated in archaeological terms by relics such as dolmens) are clearly of relevance in this connection.

Ultimately Espírito Santo attributes these manifestations of popular Catholicism to a profoundly Eastern, particularly Jewish, influence (Espírito Santo, 1988: XIV). This hypothesis should not be confused with Cryptojudaism (although certain practices and beliefs which have persisted within Cryptojudaic communities also have their parallels in contemporary popular Catholicism), since he draws explicit parallels between specific practices in rural Portugal today and rites alluded to in the Bible which are no longer current even in the Middle East (Espírito Santo, 1988: XIV). In the case of Cryptojudaism, Jewish beliefs are in clear tension with Christianity, and the fact that many of the practices involved have become unconscious ones does not detract from the strategy of dissimulation which lay behind their original adoption; in the context of popular Catholicism, however, at least at a conscious level, adherents consider themselves to be Christians, and the Semitic heritage is a far more distant one, of which the majority of the population are probably ignorant, with the openness of the ceremonies which characterise this tradition pointing clearly to their spontaneity.

The principal factor which Espírito Santo cites in this connection is the specifically female conception of the Holy Spirit in the popular tradition; he traces this back to the original meaning of the Hebrew word *ruah*, which he defines as the vital spirit of life which animates all of nature (Espírito Santo, 1988: 109), thus prompting obvious comparisons with the 'Spirit of God' which is said to have 'moved on the face of the waters' in Genesis 1.2. He sees this dynamic spirit as energising the 'folias' or uninhibited dances which mark popular festivities during Pentecost (Espírito Santo, 1988: 115-17), thus bringing Portuguese popular Catholicism closer, at least in this respect, to the frenzied possession of the adherent by an *orixá* in Brazilian Candomblé than to the conventional, reverent image of mainstream Catholicism.<sup>2</sup>

Popular Portuguese Catholicism remains more resistant to outside influence than the clearly moribund practice of Cryptojudaism, and events such as the 'banhos santos' held in Esposende in August of every year continue to

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<sup>2</sup> In a wider European context, these 'folias' echo the legend of St. Vitus' dance, a term which at least in English has now been debased in reference to signify merely continuous and involuntary physical restlessness.

attract large numbers of people. Nonetheless, social changes such as higher levels of education, greater social mobility, increased ease of communication between previously isolated communities, modern communications networks, the progressive secularisation of contemporary society, and the gradual abolition of traditional gender roles will undoubtedly weaken the hold of many of these practices on the popular mind; the possibility exists, therefore, that even if some of these practices persist they may gradually lose their sense of the sacred and become merely local traditions, increasingly devoid of deeper significance. Nor does the popular Catholicism of rural Portugal have the powerful associations with a clearly delineated racial or ethnic community which has helped to preserve and, indeed, to strengthen the position of Umbanda and Candomblé in Brazil. It is probable, therefore, that this form of practice, in common with Cryptojudaism, will slowly disappear from Portuguese life within the foreseeable future. However its contribution to the music, visual arts, legends, popular festivities and literature of Portugal has been an invaluable one.

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