

# **Crisis as Opportunity: Church Structure in Times of Global Transformations Religion within a context of globalisation: the case of Brazil\***

*Edin Sued Abumanssur [abumanssur@planeta3.com.br]*

## **Foreword**

Protestantism, in Brazil, is not a religion that has roots in the country's traditional culture. It was imported from Europe and the United States in the 19th Century and for 150 years remained somewhat exogenous, impervious to popular culture, alien to the sensitivities of a mysticism comprised of a mixture of elements from African and indigenous cosmovisions as well as from a rustic and magical Catholicism.

Protestantism in Brazil, among other possible classifications, can be divided into two models with different *ethos* and *modus operandi*. We refer to the first model as immigration-based Protestantism. The churches that follow this model originate from the large numbers of mainly European immigrants that landed in Brazil at the beginning of the 19th Century, within the context of the need to replace the Negro slave workforce and to populate the new agricultural frontiers that were being opened up at that time. The second model, which we refer to as mission-based Protestantism, was implanted in Brazil by missionaries, almost always American, who arrived in South America during the second half of the 19th Century with the intention of evangelising it and turning it into a Protestant region. Lutherans and members of reformed churches are represented in both these models of Brazilian Protestantism. Both of them began as something somewhat alien to life in the former Portuguese colony that had only recently conquered its independence.

---

\* The article is based on a paper presented at the *World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Germany, February 2002*.

The *ethos* of each of these forms of Protestantism is quite distinct: the churches founded by immigrants saw themselves as ethnic churches, organised to help the families of their members in moments of need. As a result, they did not seek to multiply themselves through proselytisation. This Religious confession was part of a cultural tradition linked to European origins. On the other hand, Protestants with origins in the initiatives of missionaries believed that the *raison d'être* of their churches was to evangelise the entire world, which meant seeking new members through conversion to Protestantism.

The vision that these different groups of Protestants have of themselves defined the way in which each of them broached the dialogue with the hegemonic Brazilian culture of the period. Those churches that saw themselves as providers of services to their member communities and families kept themselves apart from the social and cultural dynamics of predominant society. Those churches that saw themselves as a means of saving the world opened channels of communication with local cultures principally in order to define differences and highlight the benefits of opting for Protestantism. It was a relationship based on antagonism and opposition towards everything that could be perceived as having links with the roots of Brazilian culture. It was within the context of such antagonism and the awareness of being a minority that the identity of the Brazilian Protestant was formed. During its first decades in Brazil, Protestantism therefore established itself as something apart from the society marked by the hegemony of a form of Catholicism which, much more than a mere question of a religious confession, was also the emblem of national identity.

Even today, 150 years after its arrival in Brazil, this model of Protestantism continues to be something apart from everything that can be considered as "Brazilian culture". According to the 1991 census (the 2000 census has not yet been completely published), Catholics accounted for 83% of the population. All the remaining religions – Protestant, Pentecostal, Spiritualist, Afro-Brazilian, Oriental, new religious movements, etc. – accounted for only 12% of the population. This fact alone would be sufficient to fuel the discussion about ecumenism in Brazil, as it summarises the extent of Brazilian religious plurality. In terms of religion, the biggest increase was observed amongst those who stated that they had no religion: in the 1980's they were 1.6% of the population whilst in 1991 they were 4.7%, representing an increase of 250%. Only 3% of the population was Protestant, indicating that

Brazilians prefer to have no religion rather than become Protestant. Followers of the Pentecostal faith account for 5.6% of the population, showing an increase of 67% over the 1980's, which is 2.8 times greater than the increase in the Brazilian population in the same period.

## **Brazilian religious identity**

The data provided by the census demonstrating that 83% of the Brazilian population claims to be Catholic may in fact hide the reality of the religious phenomenon in Brazil. Above all, one cannot refer to Catholicism in the singular, but rather to Catholicisms, in the plural. Brazilians are Catholic but in many different ways.

Roman Catholicism is present and is characterised by parochial organisation, with its dominical masses, its processions and religious ceremonies, its piety and morality. It is a Catholicism centred on the authority of the religious hierarchy and on the formality of the relationships between the clergy and laypersons. Side by side with this form of Catholicism is another one, the organisational emphasis of which is based on the layperson, its brother and sisterhoods and its fraternities. It is a more celebratory Catholicism directed towards the devotion of saints and souls. This form of Catholicism flourished in colonial Brazil, where the presence of the clergy was scarce and intermittent. It was responsible for the religious vivacity that occurred in a period when the Catholic Church did not have a sufficiently far-reaching structure to cover the entire Brazilian territory. There is also another, more recent, form of Catholicism referred to as "charismatic" Catholicism which accounts for the principal indexes of the growth of the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil. From a formal point of view, it is centred on certain characters such as, for example, father Marcelo Rossi, although internally it also depends on lay movements. It is a form of Catholicism that emphasises individual devotion and the personal religious experience.

Our intention is to state that Brazilian Catholicism is not univocal. On the contrary, it is comprised of different religious experiences. By means of the juxtaposition of these forms of Catholicism, a clear class distinction can be seen. One of them is centred on a structure that is hierarchical, learned, cultured, intellectual and accustomed to its official forms of

expression, restricted to an intellectualised elite<sup>1</sup>. The other, where the layperson has a more significant role, is more concerned with social classes with less purchase power and those that can be referred to as "working class". It is precisely in these social segments that the fundamentals of a religiousness comprised of various elements can be found and which could define a possible Brazilian religious identity.

In truth, if we think in terms of religious identity, we can distinguish different sources: Catholicism, whether official or popular, Afro-Brazilian religions such as *candomblé* and *umbanda*, spiritualism based on mediums and, undoubtedly, traces of indigenous religions. As such, Brazilian religious identity has developed to the contrary of the purification of religious beliefs. It has been produced precisely by the syncretism of different religions and cosmovisions. In Brazil "the extreme mobility of the majority of the faithful, their ability to simultaneously manipulate a variety of beliefs, producing the most unexpected combinations, the unbelievable religious inventiveness, are all signs of this Brazilian syndrome"<sup>2</sup>.

The mobility of the people that are faithful to these religions and the ease with which they change from one religion to another produce the phenomenon called "religious transit". Loyalties, for them, are not eternal nor limited to a single confession. It is within this context that exclusive religions can be seen to be incongruous due to their demanding unconditional and crystallised commitment. This includes Protestantism.

Protestants, principally those belonging to the puritan church matrix, do not feel comfortable with this mixture of religions. Syncretism is seen as something suspect, impure and incorrect. It is, however, precisely within this melting pot of cultures and religions that Brazilians were produced. As such, conversion to Protestantism implies in giving up a certain amount of "brazilianness", almost always in favour of values that come from the countries in which Protestantism originated.

---

<sup>1</sup> Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz, "Identidade nacional, religião, expressões culturais: a criação religiosa no Brasil", In: Viola Sachs et al., *Brasil & EUA: religião e identidade nacional*, Graal, Rio de Janeiro, 1988 p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> Rubem César Fernandes, "Aparecida: nossa rainha, senhora e mãe, saravá!", In: Viola Sachs et al., *Brasil & EUA: religião e identidade nacional*, Graal, Rio de Janeiro, 1988 p. 109.

## The neo-Pentecostal Church and Brazilian religious identity

In the same way that Catholicism cannot be referred to in the singular, unless as an ideal Weberian type, the same is true of Pentecostalism. In accordance with a virtually consensual typology in Brazil, the implantation of the Pentecostal churches can be divided into three phases<sup>3</sup>. These phases correspond to three distinct periods marked by particular characteristics with regard to how the churches related to Brazilian religiousness.

The first phase occurred at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, with the arrival of the Christian Congregation (1910) and the Assembly of God (1911). For 40 years they were the only Pentecostal churches in Brazil (a few other inexpressive Pentecostal churches, that splintered off from the Assembly of God also exist). These churches of the first phase were particularly characterised by the way they sought to ostentate the signs of holiness, which meant making evident the difference between "being a believer" and "being worldly". This was made evident by the way of dressing, abstinence from alcohol and smoking, keeping a distance from any form of gaming or pleasure such as dancing, sports, cinema or music that was not religious. In other words, these Pentecostalists, following a typical sectarian mentality, sought to differentiate themselves from anything that could associate them with Catholics. In the same way as for the Protestants, to be a believer for these Pentecostalists meant exhibiting behavioural distinctions so as to make evident their conversion and provide it with some meaning within the context of the culture of the majority.

The second phase of Pentecostalism in Brazil began to appear around the 1950s. It was a period of rapid and chaotic urbanisation which accompanied an accentuated process of industrialisation which sought to replace traditional agricultural exportation with manufactured or semi-manufactured products. Although this Pentecostal phase began with the arrival of the Four-Square Gospel Church<sup>4</sup>, the *O Brasil para Cristo* (Brazil for Christ) and the *Deus é Amor* (God is Love) churches were those that most grew and made their mark on this period in history. These two churches sought to maintain a more positive

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Paul Freston, "Breve História do Pentecostalismo Brasileiro", In: Alberto Antoniazzi et. al., *Nem anjos, nem demônios: interpretações sociológicas do pentecostalismo*, Vozes, Petrópolis, 1994. p. 70.

<sup>4</sup> The International Church of The Four-Square Gospel arrived in Brazil from California. It was founded by Aimee Semple McPherson in the 1920s. It is the only Pentecostal denomination founded and lead by a woman.

dialogue with Brazilian society. The *O Brasil para Cristo* church was the first Pentecostal church to occupy public spaces, such as squares, stadiums and radio stations, with their preachings. It was also the first Pentecostal church to elect a federal member of parliament. Attitudes such as these were unthinkable to the Pentecostal churches of the first phase.

Although the Pentecostal church *Deus é Amor* came into being at the same time as the *O Brasil para Cristo* church, to a great extent it was the precursor of many of the characteristics of the third phase, such as, for example, the use of uniforms by the helpers at the services, exorcisms, encounters with demons. The *Deus é Amor* church also attacks Afro-Brazilian cults and incorporates elements that are typical of popular Catholicism, such as the unction of objects and prayer chains which are similar to the novenas of penitence<sup>5</sup>.

The third phase of the implantation of Pentecostalism in Brazil is marked by churches referred to in the academic world as "neo-Pentecostal". They began to appear in the 1980s in Rio de Janeiro. The most noteworthy was the *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God)<sup>6</sup>. These churches do not ostentate signs of holiness, as a means of expressing their members' adoption of a new code of conduct and ideas. The strategy in this case would appear not to strive to stand out as different, but rather to identify with the culture of the environment in which such churches are set up.

The churches of the third phase have characteristics that distance them from the preceding Pentecostal churches. The neo-Pentecostal churches believe that they are taking part in a "spiritual war" between God and the devil and that what happens to people on this Earth is in some way connected with that war. The side of the battle trench that a person opts for determines their wellbeing and their personal success. Family problems, problems at work and in one's personal life as well as all the mishaps that happen on a daily basis are attributed to the acts of the devil in people's lives. These Pentecostal churches give little or

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Paul Freston, *ibid.*, p. 128. Referring to the permanence of archaic Catholic elements in Pentecostal religions, cf. João Décio Passos, "O pentecostalismo brasileiro: resíduos e afinidades". In: *Religião e Cultura*, 1 (1), julho/dezembro de 2001, PUC-SP, São Paulo.

<sup>6</sup> The IURD first appeared in Rio de Janeiro in 1978, but there are others: *Igreja Apostólica Renascer em Cristo*, *Internacional da Graça*, *Sara Nossa Terra*. Although distinctions exist between them, principally with regard to the segmentation of the religious market, the characteristics described here are common to all of them.

no importance to ascetic behaviour whether in terms of fashion or customs as evidence of holiness, or in the way they behave with regard to business and dealing with money<sup>7</sup>.

The religious scenario shared by the neo-Pentecostal churches is marked by the strong presence of *Umbanda* and popular Catholicism. These three religions mobilise the same social segment and use the same repertoire, placing a new order on symbols and values, inverting their polarities.

The idea of phases of implantation leaves the typology of the Pentecostal churches in Brazil unclear. There are cultural elements of both separation and unity within the different phases of Brazilian Pentecostalism. Contamination also exists between each of the phases, so much so that it is possible to encounter characteristics that are common to all of them. It should also be remembered that churches tend to copy from each other procedures that ensure their survival in the battle between the religious markets. For example, the use they make of the media is one of the elements that determines their continued presence or expulsion from this market.

As for the audience targeted by the neo-Pentecostal churches, the Lutheran doctrine of the grace of God, or Calvinist predestination, are incapable of providing daily reality with an understandable or acceptable meaning. It is hard to understand the grace of God in the midst of disease, violence and poverty. It is harder still to understand that this situation is a result of God's intentions. For this reason the Pentecostal rationality has found in the "spiritual battle" a viewpoint which gives meaning to such things. In this battle, religious discourse reencounters the plausibility that had been lost in the process of secularisation. The theology of the "spiritual battle", together with the theology of prosperity, are more appropriate for the segment of the population that is excluded from the consumer market or which is under constant threat of exclusion. By rejecting such exclusion, as something that happens *a priori* and being able to understand it as the momentarily unfavourable result of a "game" that has not yet come to an end, these theologies offer an alternative and a motive

<sup>7</sup> According to Mariano, "This breakaway from puritan sectarianism and asceticism comprises the principal distinction of neo-Pentecostalism. This represents a very big change in the direction taken by the Pentecostal movement, so much so that it can be stated that neo-Pentecostalism constitutes the first Pentecostal tendency of affirmation of the world. Whilst there are not significant theological differences between the first two Pentecostal, the opposite can be seen to be the case when comparing neo-Pentecostalism to preceding tendencies". Cf. Ricardo Mariano, *Neopentecostais*, sociologia do novo pentecostalismo no Brasil, p. 36.

for taking action. God is with us, working in favour of those that fulfil the obligations of their faith.

An essential characteristic of this vision of the world is the general guideline of looking to the present rather than to future death, resurrection and final judgement. The neo-Pentecostal discourse encourages the investment of time, money and attention to this life. Emphasising the life to come, the final judgement, eternal suffering, in the way that the Protestants do, would be totally out of keeping with this theology of prosperity. This absence of "macro-temporalness", with neither a before nor an after, this silence in relation to a teleology of history, also leaves its characteristic marks on this church's services and meetings. All hope is directed towards the here and now and wears itself out in its vicissitudes.

### **Secularisation and globalisation as a key to the understanding of the contemporary religious phenomenon**

The growth of the neo-Pentecostal churches has lead students of religious phenomena to ask themselves whether we are still living through a process of secularisation or if we are witnessing a re-enchantment of the world. The answer to this question will depend on the way in which this issue of secularisation is approached. However, whether we are being secularised or not, it is evident to the observer that the religious behaviour of western mankind has changed and has continued to change during recent decades.

The process of economic and cultural globalisation has caused changes in the way religious organisations work, co-opt and control their members. The element that guides people's actions is no longer tradition, but rather the models portrayed by the media. The neo-Pentecostal churches have switched the centre of attention, removing it from the religious discourse based on a process that disenchanting generations of the faithful, replacing it by a discourse that is more dynamic, easier to assimilate and absorb. "Emphasis on the finished 'religious product' sculpted by tradition and institutionally ratified, such as dogmas, rites and

theologies has been left to one side and has been replaced by concentration on the needs of the 'consumer'<sup>8</sup>.

The approach of these new churches is modern in that they incorporate the logic of the market in the way they act and in their organisational structure. By transforming religion into a consumer product and standardising the product so as to meet the needs of their consumers, the neo-Pentecostal churches have placed themselves in favour of a tendency that has overtaken cultures world-wide, whereby everything is transformed into consumer goods: education, affection, sex, time. Globalisation is the extension of the market logic not only everywhere on the entire planet but also, and above all, to the different areas of experiences of living. It is from this point of view, that of the commercialisation of every part of our lives, that it can be stated that globalisation is a phenomenon that also includes religion. Transforming religion into a product for consumption is to turn it into a type of goods that is comparable in worth to other symbolic goods and belongings that are available to meet consumer interests and needs. Anything of comparable value is susceptible to being given a monetary value and, consequently, to being quantified as well

The neo-Pentecostal churches are also modern in that they have incorporated the most traditional practices of popular Brazilian religiousness. They "link magic and popular practices (...) to 'products' typical of the post-modern era, that emphasises people's psychological and social wellbeing"<sup>9</sup>. This mixture of archaic practices with elements from modern times is done extremely skilfully, enabling the faithful to associate with ancient forms of religious expression, both Christian and non-Christian, that are still alive in everyday life in Brazil and Latin America and which do not distinguish clearly between magic and religion, whilst also dealing with problems and difficulties in their individual and private dimension.

Globalisation, therefore, when viewed as a background to the issue of religion, does not refer to its ability to extend itself geographically but rather to the coverage of this market logic in which everything can be commercialised, including, of course, religion. Religion, by

---

<sup>8</sup> Leonildo Silveira Campos, *Teatro, templo e mercado: organização e marketing de um empreendimento neopentecostal*, Petrópolis, Vozes e São Paulo, Umesp e Simpósio, 1997. p. 221.

<sup>9</sup> Id., *ibid.*, p. 224.

changing its essential character, by losing its quality of giving meaning to life and death, by transforming itself into yet another resort available to the individual in his or her search for solutions or success, also surrenders itself to this world-wide economic process known as globalisation.

The term *oikoumene*, which gave rise to the word ecumenism, served in other times and contexts to designate a world subject to some sort of globalising order: Greek, Roman or Christian. The current process of globalisation can also be understood as an attempt to create a new *oikoumene*, the aim of which would be to bring a new and better standard of living to all the peoples<sup>10</sup>. This *oikoumene* would be a concert of the nations founded on the new economic order in which, in truth, not all the peoples are able to take part. This new *oikoumene* defines its citizens based on their ability to consume and the rights of citizenship are confused with those of the consumer. Religion, seen and understood as yet another product on offer on the market is, perhaps, the last cultural component to suffer this modern-day avatar.

In conclusion: secularisation does not mean a world without religion but rather a religion deprived of axiological fundamentals and incapable of bringing any intelligibility to life. Secularisation, understood in this manner, is the necessary condition for a far-reaching and profound process of transformation of the world into a global market.

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf., E. S. Abumanssur, "Ecumenismo, protestantismo e cidadania: uma chave de leitura sobre a unidade das igrejas". In: *Revista da Associação de Pós Graduandos da PUC-SP*, São Paulo, ano VIII, n.º 19 (Especial), 1999.