

THE SOCIAL SCIENCES OF RELIGION IN BRAZIL

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Abstract: This is a panorama of the successive meanings acquired by the Social Sciences of Religion during their recent institutionalization in Brazil. Seven “moments” are emphasized, each with their own respective density of thematic attention. The first of these moments comes from within religious institutions, a “religious sociology”, that is gradually transformed and made autonomous, becoming “Social Science of Religion”. Afterwards, successive discoveries of popular religion were made, being a politically impregnated religion in a politically unstable society such as Brazil, with a persistent religious sense of religion, and whose questions sprang from secularization and the advent of the New Religious Movements. Correlatively, what then called and still continues calling attention are the signs of resistance from the part of traditional institutions. The study is concluded by pointing towards a prospective: tomorrow’s “moment” may be marked, on the one hand, by the new modalities of religious individuals adhering to their own institutions of reference and, on the other hand, by crossovers between a double pluralism that implies religion as well as culture in the problematic of creating identities.

Keywords: Social Science of Religion, religious institutions, individualization, secularization, pluralism.

This is not a history of Social Science of Religion in Brazil, nor is this article indicative of a bibliographical itinerary, being a mere retrospective, and quite subjective at that, perhaps superficial and most certainly incomplete. The intention here is to encounter a meaning – one of many possible meanings – for a trajectory that, on the other hand, I don’t aim at sketching in a balanced way: I will perhaps over-insist on moments that newer generations are less familiar with. In sum, this trajectory shouldn’t cover exclusively Brazil, yet may simply find, at certain moments, specific resonances within Brazil. There

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are two motives for this: Social Science of Religion is not independent of the Social Sciences *tout court*, and “religion”, a social reality, is not independent of the social totality in which it takes place. There is a specific Social-Science focus in each case of a specific society, but the contrary holds good as well: the trajectory of the Social Science of Religion in Brazil also accompanied the field’s international trajectory. It’s within this dimension that I would like to start.

Should I thus speak of a “first phase”? Or a first “moment”, since I’m not referring to perfectly successive phases, but moments partially overlaid, characterized by densities different from these same thematic considerations. In this sense, from the “first moment” on, there were forerunners in Brazil. Anthropology had already dealt with religious segments considered “marginal” (“different”, exotic, picturesque or problematic). Indigenous religions (very few), as well as (much more) Afro religions which, initially considered apart from society, as “niches” – or even as iconoclastic – within society, deserving only segmented attention, became progressively discovered as a meaningful and active part of national culture... This treatment differs from Catholicism, central in Brazilian society, and, as such, the object of globally meaningful work, which, even if apologetic, aimed at underscoring this religion’s genetic ties to Brazil (starting with the famous *Conferências Anchietaanas*, of 1897). Yet there existed perspectives that may be considered as analytical forerunners. I will quote three of them:² concerning Catholicism, the brilliant problematic put forth by Gilberto Freire. “Brazilian Catholicism”? Yes, but more towards Catholic or more towards Brazilian? Regarding *Candomblé*, or the set of religions whose basis is receiving or incorporating spirits, there are, among others, Bastide’s work, on the one hand, or Cândido Procópio Camargo’s, on the other, who treated these religions as an effective and active part of a series of transformations, both earlier and contemporary, happening within the same country.

Yet let’s start with the first “*Moment*” of the almost institutional outbreak of Social Science of Religion in Brazil.

² I haven’t quoted any living authors so as neither to reduce the chosen works to single-handed perspectives nor to give the impression of having forgotten those authors not quoted in this text.

Paradoxically, it was *within the religious institutions themselves* that a then called “religious sociology” first took shape. This corresponds to an international current: the religions themselves discovered that empirical Social Science could serve as an instrument to improve pastoral approaches: become more familiar with reality so as to act upon it, since “religion” tended not to be lived as a “natural” phenomenon (“naturally social”)... an insider’s view, yet, at the same time, critical. Within this optic, large-scale research was carried out within religious institutions in France, Belgium and other countries as well, with massive involvement of clerics. The result was an effective pastoral work (pastoral-critical – and, actually, heavily criticized by the conservative wings) followed by concrete applications: Diocesan Missions, hence strategically guided by a mapping-out of social reality. This phase was important to help bring forth contemporary empirical Social Science of Religion, for two motives. On the one hand, it represented the beginning of a systematic (and official) framing of religions to the diversity of the social map: to each group its own modality of religion. On the other hand, different crossings-over of views took shape for the first time (pastoral and scientific, empirical and normative) about an identical reality during the war and immediate post-war years. In this undertaking, the scientific tools consisted of, on the one hand, the notion of “social milieu” (agricultural, middle-class, industrial, etc.), more inspired in Le Play than in Marxism; on the other hand, a predominantly socio-graphical methodology; quantified descriptions, behavioral surveys (“practice”, i.e.: “practices”, measuring ritual practices in order to gauge the quality of religious life), projections – open to institutional interventions and pastoral strategies. This resulted in a profile of “Catholicism” in differentiated layers, from a social point of view (“popular Catholicism”) as well as in terms of the faithful’s practical involvement (practicing, nominal, and “seasonal” Catholics – this last category being a kind of natural religion, based on the seasons of nature and lifecycle, and coated with Catholicism). This was a new vision, internal and utilitarian, yet full of discoveries (such as the anthropological leaning of a relationship “seasonal” with the sacred, more radical, solid and durable than confessional forms of “Catholic practice”).

The same promoters of this research genre implanted it in Latin America. Father Houtard (key piece in the institutes for sociological-religious research

in the Catholic University of Louvain who would later assist the Sandinista government in Nicaragua) undertook an international research project (which, in Brazil, counted with the Statistic department of the *Conferências Religiosas do Brasil* – CRB) on social and religious transformations in Latin America (1958-1963). The conclusion of this research, published as a book, would mark the new perspectives: “Elements for a Sociology of Latin American Catholicism”, by Father Emile Pin (Bogota, 1963). The author doesn’t speak explicitly about “popular religion”, or “popular Catholicism”, but points towards this vast social and religious continent that the institutions were apparently ignoring.

Inspired by Father Pin and tailing this movement, here in Brazil, the CNBB (*Conferência Nacional de Bispos Brasileiros*) put together, in the swelling of the post-conciliatory crisis, and during the beginning of the authoritarian government, a research program, comprising both historical and sociological research, on religious and especially popular reality. These perspectives had already taken a critical and reformist turn: re-conquer an “authentic” Catholicism from the spaces taken by popular Catholicism. Yet this “authentic” post-council form would no longer be conservative or traditionalist.

A diacritical key thus emerged, making it possible to distinguish two versions of “popular” (“authentic” popular, acceptable to the modern pastoral organization since this might potentially create consciousness of Christian perspectives, and the deformed popular, which would have to be transformed): the engaged and the alienated versions. This would develop on the horizons of fully developmentalist sociability and egalitarian living.

From this point on, the two perspectives, pastoral and academic, became articulated, through personal relationships, joint research, and assessment. For instance, the research program organized by the CNBB was carried out by the Latin American Sociology Association (whose headquarters are located in Santiago, but with a library in Rio de Janeiro, run by Prof. Manoel Diegues), in which a variety of young sociologists, many of whom would become publicly known later on, worked together. Organisms in which both currents could work together came into being at this time. On the Catholic side, CERES, an institute of religious Sociology (directly connected to the

CNBB) was founded by a priest – today a bishop – with an undergraduate degree in Sociology from the University of Louvain. On the protestant side, on one level, the Ecumenical Movement was put together, endowed with a sociological wing (various militants and pastors are sociologists who founded together what today has become the *koinonia* movement), and on another level – and in another moment – an informal encounter was organized, little by little formalized in institutional terms by pastors, theologians, and intellectual militants, all of whom were suffering difficulties with their denominations (this was during the dictatorship, which affected many different protestant congregations). This movement rapidly turned doubly ecumenical: first because of the presence of Catholics, who were also theologians and pastoralists, and secondly through the growing participation of university level intellectuals (sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and historians), none of whom were necessarily religious, but personally interested in the destiny and social influence of religion: this “crossroads” between religious life and the academic view of religion turned into ISER (The Superior Institute for Religious Studies, later, as a sign of its not totally academic nature, The Institute of Religious Studies). Resonating from (one of the...) a reflection that spread throughout the universities, about a possibly renewed view on the relationship between reason and religion, and science and religion (one didn't yet speak in terms of Reason and Faith, as happened later on).

Indeed, from this point on, and throughout a Second Moment, these movements gained *autonomy in relation to ways of thinking specifically tied to religious denominations*.

Once again, an analogy with Europe. In France, around various secularized religious intellectuals sprang the *Groupe de Sociologie des Religions* from “l'École des Hautes Etudes em Sciences Sociales”, with its journal: *Archives de Sociologie des Religions* – and not, as initially foreseen, “*de sociologie religieuse*” or “*de sociologie de la religion*”. The titles evolved, signifying a diversification, expansion, and progressive neutrality. Finally, there were also the *Archives de Sciences Sociales des religions*. This group turned into the *Centre d'Etudes Interdisciplinaires des Faits Religieux* (CEIFR, CNRS/EHESS). Another branch of the CNRS was the *Groupe de sociologie des religions et de la laïcité*.

This group was paralleled in the EPHE (*Section des sciences religieuses*): *Institut d'études des religions et de la laïcité*, whose director was tenured for a long time as the *Chaire d'histoire et sociologie de la laïcité*. This all took place in a lay university, with no institutional ecclesiastic influence.

In Belgium, in the heart of a Catholic university, Louvain, the same evolutionary process occurred. The academic journal *Social Compass*, for example, which started off as a socio-graphical Catholic publication, tied to the socio-ecclesiastical catholic institute (ISKA), came under the regency of FERES (*Fédération Internationale des Instituts de Recherches Sociales e Socio-religieuses*), before definitively acquiring status as a scientific journal, run by the *Centre de Recherches Socio-religieuses de l'Université de Louvain* with the patronage of the *Société Internationale de Sociologie des Religions* (formerly known as the *Conférence Internationale de Sociologie religieuse*).

A third case was the only French university officially under a concordat in Strasbourg, where there were explicitly statutory programs in Religion as well as colleges of Theology. The theme, there, not only suffered greater expansion, thematic as well as geographic (Europe), but was organically inserted in the academic *corpus*. PRISME (*Politique, Religion, Institutions et Sociétés: Mutations Européennes*) also emerged as the result of the successive (and recent) fusion of three research units, all centered on Society, Law, Europe, Politics, and Religion.

The *Archives* journal, now a perfectly academic digest, ended up being responsible for three French institutions, located in two types of universities.

In Brazil, the novelty was the *Universidade de Brasília* project, whose mentor was the educator, Darcy Ribeiro, and which included a Theology College. The project didn't go through, but the initiative raised a question: how should a double study of religion, parting from within (Theology) and without, as an objectifying tool for Social Science? Faith and Reason... This is a many-faced problem, still being dealt with today with the outbreak of Centers for Religious Studies in universities, whose aims are generally clearly objectified, and more recently, Graduate programs in Religious Studies that, in a thousand different ways, try to create active and epistemological conviviality between the two perspectives, including the theological perspective.

This still makes for a rich debate today, including within academic financing organs (such as CAPES).

In any case, one may see, in this trajectory, “religion” is being treated in the singular or plural, with its eventually contradictory adjacencies: “religious with no religion”, “atheism”...

The big problem, unfolding from this stage (*Third “Moment”*) and at the crossroads of these two lines of study is precisely – especially but not only in Brazil – the question of “*popular religion*”. This is a new problem, for insiders, “independent” for outsiders who may, as such, enter the universe of religions without having to go through orthodoxies and institutions... Dialogues and controversies... What actually constitutes a popular religion? Rapidly, it may be forcefully ascertained that popular religion isn't merely an “other” religion, but an entirely “relative”, which integrates a “field”, as conceived by Bourdieu, dynamically opposed – to what? Within the field as an entirety, to other religions (or another religion) which may be dominant; there are institutionally popular religions in this sense. The opposition may also occur within a denomination, “popular” currents, as opposed (or articulated to) the official institutional religion. There are two ways of defining popular religion, which are sometimes difficult to conciliate: popular as referring to popular social classes and popular as referring to authority relations within institutions. In any case, popular may be defined as confronting (and being confronted by), even in the middle of a whole symbiotic network, a social reality of elites, thus, caught in a dialectics. “Popular” has become progressively less seen as composing a reality of its own and even lesser as an autonomous social reality. This is why, for some people, to this day, the problem of popular religion would be a false problem, although a realm of relational conflict, a dialectics that formats and reformats social realities in function of the metamorphoses in social relations of authority. A popular religion isn't substantial, but relative.

This would explain “*politics*”. This is the partly secret dimension that dominates Brazilian social science during the following period (*Fourth Moment*). At the core of this fermentation is the discovery that the religious factor can also be socially active, in the sense of resistance and liberation. I

speak of “discovery” since until this point the religious dimension had called little attention in the academic milieu of Social Science. A recent dissertation illustrates this fact; a group of social science students from a university in Belo Horizonte do research in the Vale do Jequitinhonha without considering the deeply religious roots of the populations living there. This religious vision of the world and of motivations didn't seem, according to the students, to have any sort of notable impact on the reality of social life. One could call this an almost programmed blindness, as the author might say, because these social scientists carry no sort of grill in their theoretical tool box that would be capable of another kind of comprehension. Yet the Brazilian political situation (the dictatorship) would soon impose this discovery. I remember a psychoanalyst – ex-pastor and Philosophy professor – who told me in 1976, regarding Liberation Theology as a popular religious current: “This government discovered that the Liberation Theology's “poor man” is more dangerous than the Marxist “proletarian”.

The truth is that in analytical efforts internal to religions – what social scientists observe – as well as in the popular social realities they research, these two dimensions of the “people” are effectively articulated (in an analytical dimension – actually, Marxist – and a biblical dimension, as one would usually say).

For years, Social Science of Religions in Brazil concentrated as such on the relationship between Religion and Politics. This is what predominates in a fourth Moment. All along this trail other perspectives could be seen, but these were parentheses – eventually strong ones – and the question remained: to what extent does a certain vision of the world and religious conviviality, especially in the case of a country like Brazil, where these problems are “of the masses”, contribute towards the disruptive creation of a new society, in which equity and liberty, justice and not exploitation, are may be present?

The responses to this question were quite diverse, even at the level of empirical evidence. I remember a hot debate, at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, on occasion of the opening night of an edition of the academic journal *Religião e Sociedade*, by ISEER, with the title: “Marxism and Religion”. Yet the problem was subjacent to the dialogues. Once again orchestrated, partially in reference to other dialogues, this time international, the debates mobilized paradoxal authors, creative enough to offer a bridge between the

theme of Marxism and religion. For example, the intensity of Gramsci's thought was significant (once the students indicated the discipline they wished to study: "Gramsci and Brazilian messianic movements", which Douglas Teixeira Monteiro – another national forerunner on the theme – accentuated as a source of an authentic popular political project, exactly because of its religious content).

Fifth Moment: Democratization. This term occurred to me almost automatically... This certainly doesn't constitute a topic of Social Science of Religion, but the outbreak of this discourse proved how the global state of society is parallel to effective conviviality of religion and focuses within Social Science on this subject. "Democratization" liberated the faithful from the exclusivity of the relationship between "Religion" and "Politics" (with tones of relativism before each one of these terms), and forced social analysts to re-focus their lenses towards other problems.

This caused certain surprise among social scientists, especially those seduced by the perspective of "progressive" social and political efficiency in religion. Thus, religion is important for people because of non-spiritual interests, (health, happiness, subsistence and quality of life, going beyond a mere concrete day-to-day existence, etc.) but in an individual dimension limited to daily life. This dimension had already been recognized in research and important books (about cure, for example), but was now central, rooted in a "religious experience", as a justification in and of itself, even when institutionalized after springing up a multitude of groups, communities, and churches: the "New Religious Movements".

Another reminder: I was speaking to a foreign friend, in front of whom, in a recent meeting, had evoked the hypothesis of restoration of the Catholic Church in a traditional pietism sense, as in the Nineteenth Century, since he had given up on any possibility of this in today's world. Suddenly, during a trip around the country, he called me...: "I observed, got into conversations with people... We had never imagined it, but it's everywhere...". By every part of religious "space" he meant the Pentecostal and Charismatic Catholic world. This invasion of the field was enough to offer Social Science of Religion a new object of study, but also to impose a new view. The phenomenon made a specific kind of consideration necessary, even more so since it flooded beyond its own frontiers, onto public space thanks to – among other factors – the mass media.

One question, at least implicitly, will then dominate this *Fifth Moment*, conventionally called “Secularization”. This outbreak of religion that seemed to accompany modernity in a paradoxical way: Was it real or just an illusion? Fruit of a structural wave or provisional conjunctural contingencies? Once again, international theoretical and analytical references abounded, but a rich national reserve was also being offered to the cause of empirical research. Theory and empirical research crossed paths, sometimes in a complex way that raised a series of interpretations. What was the nature of this “Sacred” that, just as it was being expelled, created the impression of “returning”? Some thought that it was actually religion itself that modernity had inexorably started expelling, from the field of social determination and epistemological plausibility. Any appearances to the contrary were mere backwardness. For others, religion had only lost its role, even though fundamental, as the root structuring the social world – or even personal identities – , but had conserved – even being able to expand its presence in the construction of subjective, individual, and, to a certain extent, even collective experience. For others, in sum, the repercussion that modernity had on the role of religion in structuring and being structured by social exchanges couldn’t be generalized. Certain societies would be going through an accelerated process of secularization, but in others, a kind of almost religious modernity to some extent was instituted.

Secularization, in any case, was an instigating theme and a tool for explanation. However, a certain consensus, at least implicit, was reached. One perhaps shouldn’t inquire to what extent the religious phenomenon has disappeared, or remained, or even returned, but rather in which terms modernity has transformed it, an uncontested metamorphosis.

“Another *Moment (the Sixth)* of interest, study, and fascination, after the collision of modernity, is for and by *the new “postmodern” forms of religion*. Are we still living this Moment? Of course, this is nothing new – nothing new in this field ever existed anyway. Even so, novelty and metamorphosis will be the directives of this Moment. I won’t go into details, since the theme is present in the memory of all readers of this literature. The definitive emergence of the individual, criteria more common to experience than to

truth, refuses to be fixed and defined, fitting in the sphere of wandering pilgrimages and search. All of these factors account for the loss of influence in defining instances of power: de-institutionalization, transit, relativizing and the fluidity of identities, the same as happens with concepts. Cultivating a universal symbolism. Hybridism.

A “state of minds” carried by a wave that, not being able to be denominated as “movement”, is a polymorphous and multivalent flow in a mode of thinking and being, sufficiently dense and autonomously assumed to be an object of auto and hetero-recognition: The Age; but also sufficiently diffuse, communicative and dialogical to reach, penetrate, color, and even reformat collective institutionalized identities. To social scientists, this seemed to be a universalizing Mark.

At the same time, however, or as a reactive consequence of this sharpening of perception, in the same authors another logical *Moment* frequently emerges (the *Seventh*), sensitive to *institutional resistances*. Despite the fluidity of the opposing tendency, identities are handsomely affirmed, sometimes against each other. A whole body of literature discovers realities of revivals in traditional religions, sometimes as two traditions (identities) articulated (the Torê and Mass), as new structures being affirmed everywhere or, as such, in the bosom of the older structures themselves, movements introducing a dynamics within these structures that, starting in one segment (youth, for instance) ends up creating social visibility for the entirety of the structure, recuperating traditional aspects (an increase in the number of seminarians) and coating them with a modern form of expressivity (charismatic); or even punctual fermentations (apparitions of the Virgin) crystallized little by little in institutionally regulated collective entities; on the margins of the institutions, apparently heteroclit groups, generally spontaneous, and that end up entering within the sphere of the churches, legitimated for being more or less explicitly channeled and consentaneous. Basically, recurrent events, such as the Pope's trips and the March for Jesus, which keep the mass media busy and mobilize the masses, serve, among other things, as an example – there's no lack of institutional affirmations about the vigorousness and size of these events never actually reached... Not even statistics are left behind: public-opinion

polls have recently obtained results that might be pointing out a pause (?) – a stop (?) or a slowing-down (?) – in the ever commented retreat of yesterday's hegemonic institution. Institutional resistance.

This is where we stand today. It would probably be useful to mention that what are being called Moments are not adequately successive periods in time. Moments are essentially logical, even though contrasting instances succeed each other in the literature.

To finish, I would now like to evoke a prospective ulterior Moment for Social Science of Religion in Brazil.

We've been speaking of institutions, of their loss of centrality and correlative resistance, but in terms of what kind of institution should we now speak of? Will the same institutions that currently dwindle away be reaffirmed? And what will be made of the relationships they maintain with the faithful who seek references of their identities within them?

If would could imagine for a *Moment of tomorrow* the kind of thematic sensibility that will mark Social Science of Religion in Brazil, two points should be indicated:

The first would be inquiring into a *new kind of arrangement that the religious individual, definitively affirmed, might know how to find in order to maintain relationships with his or her institution*. There may be no doubts that yesterday's institutional affirmation, which defines and creates total identities, doesn't simply reproduce itself. Ties of adhesion, conformation, dogmatism, ethics, and ritual expression will probably suffer a process of relativizing diversification.

The second point would part from an obstinate *pluralizing*. This means "Relations with one's institution", as mentioned above. Yet it's more and more common that this particular institution is not the only one involved in these relationships. Consciously or not, *under the categories of religion or forms of culture*, how many crossroads mark the multiple passages nowadays between these two levels of internal construction, Religion and Culture? Religious plurality (or better, pluralism), ends up constituting, not only a "religious field", in conflict, but also a "cultural field", tending towards consensus, or at least in which this consensus would constitute a problem. It's within this pluralism that religions may be found, and the influence of

each of them is wider than the radius of religious adherence to specific dogmas and rites. Each religion's imaginary, cosmology, rites, myths, and ethics pervade day-to-day life among wide segments of the population: one often doesn't know exactly where religion starts and where culture ends. Brazilian cultural conviviality is made up of – and will be continually more so – of these encounters and transmutations: Which part of these is contained within Catholic, Spiritist, and Afro culture? How does each get along with the other, puzzle each other and how is Catholic religiosity articulated with Spiritist and Afro cultures, whether this be Spiritism with Afro and Catholic culture, or *Candomblé* with Spiritist and Catholic cultures, for example?

Such a moment of consideration – if this does indeed occur – could recapitulate the other moments, reactivating their potential to question.

On the one hand, religions that we have on many occasions considered as separate universes, will make their presence felt here, in a dynamically and mysteriously articulated way since many of them are part of Brazilian culture through which they have been constituted and expressed. Two examples: the zealous *Mãe de Santo*, an ardent adept of the anti-syncretism current of *Candomblé* and an admirer of *Mãe Estela*, the leader of this current, who calmly told me about her grandchildren's baptisms. Before my surprised look she told me: "Ah! But this is something else. This is not religion. This is part of our Brazilian culture". Or, in a different way, this young, black Catholic militant and parish secretary who suddenly discovered in a *Candomblé* session "his" "God", or "God of his own design", a living God who celebrates Life – but who, none the less, doesn't change his religious affiliation. To what point may one distinguish or identify the God of his culture, or the God of his Faith?

On the other hand, the emphases given in each of these moments that we've taken up are all here with their dominating themes, directions, and biases. Here's the injunction, for each religion, of an inside vision critical of itself; a return to the touchstone of the "popular", necessary in order to avoid our own class-based projections and identify, for example, the possible existence of a popular New Age; here are politics, with their demands for institutions and visibility in public space, both cultural as well as political;

here is secularization, now made explicit from contemporary secularized culture, from whose belly religious institutions and the individual experiences of the faithful are urged to decide in favor of enculturation or counter-acculturation... – ritual, noetic, and ethical – including in a state of mutual withdrawal (“religious practitioners with no religion”, i.e., without religious institutions). It’s thus that themes succeed each other, recovered in a new key parting from the following focus: a crossed pluralism of culture and religion, of cultures and religions.

I will stop here since I’m simply suggesting that Social Science of Religion in Brazil doesn’t seem to have finished discovering and proposing ways of getting closer, in an enriching way, to the phenomenon it studies.

I’ve spoken of a nearby future in terms of: “without a doubt”, “it’s getting closer...”, “this will mark”... Maybe I should state this more timidly: “probably... Who knows...” since this field as well, and despite social scientists’ theories, in a most Brazilian way “The future is God’s to decide”.

(Translated by Michele A. Markowitz)