ARTICLES

THE ALREADY SEEN METHOD OF STUDYING RELIGION IN ANTHROPOLOGY

DOSSIER RELIGIONS: THEIR IMAGES, PERFORMANCES AND RITUALS

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ABSTRACT
This article reflects on classic anthropological approaches on the topic of religion making a counterpoint to other lines of research that more recently they privilege the role of the media in forming religious communities. Based on the work of anthropologist Birgit Meyer the proposal is to refute the reinforcement traditionally granted to the speeches of religious actors and to the meaning of symbols for ethnographic writing, starting to emphasize sensations that are shared depending on an aesthetic formation process.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is present in many places but most of the anthropologists who research this subject traditionally favor either the symbolic dimension of rituals or the literature that to some extent encodes mythical narratives, both oral and written, or more recently in the case of Brazil the speeches of political representatives who are part of the "religious bench" in Congress and dispute the power in the public sphere of human rights. Without detracting from the importance of innumerable research presented by renowned social scientists over decades, my provocation in this article is to argue that the view of intellectuals tends to be eroded when the subject is religion due both to the materials and sources that serve as a foundation for investigations and to the treatment dedicated to the topic.

I work with the hypothesis that the approach to religion in the field of anthropology follows the assumptions of a classic methodology that, by overestimating the discourses of religious actors and mainly the meanings they attribute to symbols, less attention is given to the aesthetic dimension that goes through the practices themselves. In other words, to the extent that the scope of the analysis is limited to what the actors say, the scholars who research the topic tend to obliterate the many places where the religious issue gains a public presence. In this sense, the notion of "place" as I am proposing here comprises the various media that materialize what we usually classify as religion.

In order to substantiate the hypothesis presented, I privilege the Brazilian context to point out some means that gave a public presence to different religious practices. Then, I analyze the case of the Universal do Reino de Deus Church – IURD – which since its foundation has appropriated a set of media but, despite being one of the Brazilian Christian institutions most investigated by a considerable range of anthropologists – which I will talk about in the next item –, these media are either not contemplated or are incipiently managed in research.[1]

Historically, it is possible to recognize that since the colonial period some media have given public presence to religion in the Brazilian context, mainly to the practices of Christian matrix, as we can observe, for example, in the architecture of the Igreja da Sé built in the city of Salvador in the 16th century, the sculptures by Aleijadinho dating from the 18th century, the paintings by Victor Meirelles from the 19th century, etc. Subsequently, other media such as the cinema also played an important role in the visibility of the religious issue. According to Monte-Mór (2005) the theme of popular religiosity appeared in a more experimental phase

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1. Rare exceptions have recently started to emerge, such as the research developed by Teixeira (2014) in which the anthropologist analyzes the social medias of the IURD in order to discuss gender issues.

of the cinema when, in the first decade of the twentieth century, the Italian brothers Paschoal and Affonso Segretto recorded the construction of churches, funeral rituals and religious festivals in Rio de Janeiro in images (Monte-Mór 2005, 135).

In the same period other productions, such as the films *Procissão de Nossa Senhora dos Navegantes* – directed by Diomedes Gramacho in Salvador – and *Milagres de Santo Antonio* – directed by Antonio Serra in Rio de Janeiro – both from 1912, started the religious thematic in the cinema. Thus in the 20th century this theme was addressed in the Brazilian cinema at different times and under different styles. In the 1930s for example the documentary cinema flourished with the contributions of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and his wife Dina who directed films such as *Festa do Divino Espírito Santo*, *Festejos Populares de Mogy das Cruzes*, etc. (Monte-Mór 2005, 136). In later decades some documentaries and commercial films also contemplated the subject, bringing to the fore, in addition to Christian practices, religions of African origin, shamanic rituals, kardecism, etc.

Still concerning the media, in the 1940s the Adventista do Sétimo Dia Church began its forays into radio stations and in 1962 that institution launched the first evangelical program shown on television: *Fé para Hoje*, presented by the pastor Alcides Campolongo (Fonteles 2007). Through radio and television many evangelical denominations have occupied a prominent place in the public scene such as the IURD which, in addition to these media, has been investing heavily in social media, also in films produced for the cinema, and for some time it has become one of the most researched institutions in academia. So, despite the abundance of academic work on IURD, how to justify the lack of interest from researchers with the media apparatus of the church? Before answering the question, I will briefly return to Universal's foundation history.

Classified by the academic literature as one of the main exponents of the so-called "neopentecostal churches", the IURD was founded by the pastor Edir Macedo in 1977 in the neighborhood of Abolição – at Rio de Janeiro city. Currently, Universal has around 6000 temples throughout Brazil, besides branches located in countries in Europe, Africa and Asia. In addition, the church owns some media such as the radio channel *Rede Aleluia*, the newspaper *Folha Universal*, the television station *Rede Record*, a website, a page on the social media Facebook, an account on the social media Twitter, etc.[2] In this way, over four decades the IURD has achieved significant public recognition, becoming a phenomenon in terms of its ability to consolidate a large audience worldwide.

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2. https://www.universal.org/a-universal/home/. Accessed May 20, 2020.

Unlike most of the anthropologists who researched the trajectory of the IURD and justified the institution's reach based on the messages of salvation and prosperity – propagated by Edir Macedo and other pastors to churchgoers –, in my view Universal's success is indebted to media marketing built around the figure of its founder. In other words, IURD's media promoted Edir Macedo's visibility on the public scene and the effects of this publicity were effective as his image was materialized according to the specificities of each medium - I will return to this point later.

In this sense, a comprehension of Universal's trajectory that takes into account the media, not exclusively the "prophetic" messages, makes it possible to formulate consistent interpretations about the dimension of this institution. Therefore, it is necessary to go beyond the scope of the meanings attributed by the scholars to the iurdian symbols and start looking at the aesthetic dimension immanent to the media. However, as I will show below, this way of analyzing the religious question based on materialities opposes an already consolidated tradition of studies.

THE IURD APPROACH IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL LITERATURE

Many scholars who research the so-called "neo-Pentecostalism" in Brazil investigated the trajectory and projects of the IURD (Almeida 2009, Suede 2020, Gutierrez 2015, Mariano 1999, Oro 2003, Soares 1993). Among other issues, these intellectuals call into question why the church has achieved such visibility, bringing together a very large number of connoisseurs and regulars both inside and outside the country. In addition, they investigate the incisive performance of the iurdian leaders in the public space, especially that of Edir Macedo. Keeping in mind the specifics of each research, the justification presented by the mentioned authors is anchored in the discursive dimension. In their view, both the IURD's proselytizing tactics and its alliances made within the framework of institutional policy would be, roughly speaking, the main strategies that guarantee success for the church's projects. In other words, the pillars of Universal's undeniable reach would be indebted to the preachings that make up a "prosperity theology", to the incessant articulations that aim at the power and the attacks of the IURD to other religious groups.

If we take as an example a recent article written by Camurça (2020), it is clear how this analytical formula was consolidated in academia. Based on data about the 2018 election campaign, through which it appears that among the 22 parliamentarians elected by the Partido Republicano Brasileiro (PRB) 19 associated the name of the IURD with their respective campaigns, the background of the Camurça's text is the following controversy: on the one hand Universal gained such power due to its onslaught in an expansionist offensive for public space and politics, on the other hand the church adopts a posture of victimization when managing the

notion of "minority" in its marketing strategies.The argument developed by this author is in line with that reiterated by other scholars according to which the public visibility of the IURD would result from the large number of undertakings that give multinational dimensions to the church added to moments of accusations and condemnations, such as the arrest of Edir Macedo in 1992,3 from retaliation to the episode known as "kick in the saint"4, among others. Also, according to the scholars, the agency of the notion of "minority", as a translation of the idea of "persecuted church", would be the result of the IURD's artifice in putting in its favor the controversial content of some episodes thus guaranteeing the maintaining its visibility.

From the point of view of the iurdian leaderships, Camurça's considerations are partly pertinent. Since Universal has greatly expanded its ventures and Edir Macedo bought an open television station – Rede Record –, it is clear that the church responds to the demands of the capitalist system by playing the market game that presupposes, among other things, competition strategies and state control. In the meantime, a series of disputes has surfaced: in the media, the rivalry between Rede Globo – the most important television station in Brazil – and Record; in the religious field, the constant offensives against other Christian denominations, Afro-Brazilian religions, etc. However a large part of these scholars, who carried out ethnographies on the IURD, is unanimous in noting that the support base of the church or the mass of regulars and followers of the iurdian projects are people who live in precarious situations and mostly live in peripherals contexts. Thus, supposing that the constitution of this base, without which the IURD would not have had the scope it did, is solely indebted to logical-discursive schemes is an argument that supplants the understanding of Universal's consolidation dynamics.

In my point of view the different media appropriated by IURD and how the church, through these media, built Edir Macedo's image attracted numerous followers as this image was being adapted to the aesthetic specificities of each media – radio, television, cinema, social media – and ended up materializing the figure of a pastor who performs at the same time the role of a "suffering" man, as a result of public persecution and retaliation, and that of a "sanctified" man, with a view to his "prophetic" gift and his expansionist vocation. Thus, Universal's media apparatus has been attracting an audience to the extent that these media bring

3. Edir Macedo started to gain wide public notoriety when the press covered his prison and, mainly, the vigils held at the prison door by IURD goers. Without detailing the case, roughly speaking, he had been arrested as a result of a felony charge.
4. Episode that occurred in 1995 when one of the pastors of the IURD when appearing on a TV program on Rede Record kicked an image of Nossa Senhora de Aparecida – one of the icons of Catholicism – during the program's exhibition.

Edir Macedo's image closer to that of a biblical character, arousing shared feelings of commiseration and adoration among this audience.

The notion of shared sensation – a subject to be discussed in the next item – is a central element to analyze the materialities present in a religious practice, but this notion ends up being neglected by anthropologists who conceive of religion as an exclusive question of the order of meaning. The overvaluation of meaning however is not unreasonable since the place that the IURD occupies in the academy meets the literary canon responsible for the foundation of the field of social sciences on the European continent whose texts, classics published between the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, brought up the religious issue. It would not be appropriate to carry out a complete bibliographic review but to point out some lines of research more or less common to these publications and their reverberations in the consolidation of anthropology as an academic discipline based on questions and methods systematized by authors such as B. Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, and E. E. Evans-Pritchard.

In the second half of the 19th century, a period in which the European intelligentsia chose science as the legitimate and authentic discourse to guide the functioning of the institutions that made up modern European states, authors such as Sir James Frazer (1976) and Edward B. Tylor (2016), in an evolutionary perspective, built arguments to affirm what would be universal in all human societies: a recurring topic among thinkers of the time which echoed in the formation of the field of social sciences. In terms of classification dynamics, both authors established distinctions between the categories of religion, magic and science, living up to one of the obsessions of the XIX, the case of narratives about the origins of man capable of explaining, among other issues, the birth of religion (Ortiz 2012). In collecting records about peoples who would have preceded the others on a supposed "evolutionary" scale of humanity, roughly speaking, Frazer and Tylor defended the thesis that religious and magical principles would be indebted to a period when "wild" thought did not distinguish the natural from the supernatural yet.

The ethnocentric view contained in the explanations of these mentioned authors, although opposed in some aspects, was taken up at the beginning of the 20th century when the intellectuals of the so-called French school approached the theme of religion in their works. Thus, Émile Durkheim in The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1989) argued that in the constitution of societies organized in clans, religion would be par excellence the elementary form of social cohesion. To substantiate his point of view, the author chose the Australian totemic system as the model to contain this structural elementality, universal and previous to all other forms. By calling attention to the presence of totems within indigenous groups,

which result from mythical-ritual relationships between human beings and material forms – be they animals or plants –, Durkheim concluded that through religious thought a group "sacralizes" determined form, creating a collective representation capable of perpetuating society itself.

Therefore, instead of the contrast between natural and supernatural, it was the conceptions of "sacred" and "profane" that permeated Durkheim's analyzes. According to the author, totemic sacredness would result from a set of ritual operations that associate totems with meanings that do not exist in the uniqueness of banal objects or profane things. Still in the European context, scholars like Rudolf Otto (2007) explored the theme of religion also contemplating the notion of the sacred. However, differently from the Durkheimian sociological perspective, Otto approached the issue from a phenomenological point of view. In other words, sacredness would not be the result of a representation since the sacred, in the author's view, is a category that does not derive from something being made up of both rational concepts and unspeakable elements, both given a priori and immanent to the "human spirit", a fact that would make them independent of psychic mediation.

Still in this context, another important legacy to the field of social sciences was the work The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism by Max Weber. The first edition of this text dates from 1904 and Weber proposed a thesis on the relationship between capitalism and Protestantism based on the doctrinal corpus formulated by Lutheranism and Calvinism/Puritanism. In his view, the "spirit of capitalism" should not be confused with the mode of production itself, but taken as a mentality or conduct that is indebted to these Christian doctrines which associated with the notion of professional "success" and consequent prosperity associated with the idea of election or divine choice (Weber 2004).

Other authors could be mentioned, but, as stated earlier, my intention is not to exhaust a bibliographic review. The greatest interest is to highlight the argument that permeates the works quoted: in the view of these intellectuals, religion is a category associated with the order of the mentality, the idea, the meaning. Such a way of approaching the theme influenced the consolidation of anthropology as an academic discipline, even though starting with Malinowski fieldwork and face-to-face contact between researchers and natives re-proposed previous research methods limited mainly to reading and analyzing manuscripts, doctrinal texts, etc.

Malinowski (1978), when analyzing the role of magic in the daily life of Trobriandesa society, wrote one of the most canonical texts for anthropological studies: Argonauts of the Western Pacific. Undoubtedly, the highlight of the work is the discussion made by the author about the

presence of magic in the different sectors of life of the natives in the Trobriand Islands, ranging from the exchange of objects – *Kula* –, through agriculture to funeral rituals. However, even though he observed the non-separation between everyday practices and "magical" ceremonial aspects, Malinowski defined the relationship between the Trobriandeses and magic in terms of a psychological operation, discarding the agency of material forms in this process. Thus says the author: "The strength of magic does not lie in things" (Malinowski 1978, 299).

Radcliffe-Brown (2013), on the other hand, opposed Malinowski's functionalist view paying attention to the question of symbols according to the notion of effectiveness. Criticizing a tradition of studies that since Frazer established conceptual differences between magic and religion, Radcliffe-Brown considered praxis as the only possible dividing line between both spheres and argued that religion builds dependency relations since success in everyday life would be linked to the rituals of worshiping ancestry. In this sense the author proposes that ritual practices should be studied not for their purpose but for the meaning they carry.

In turn, Evans-Pritchard (2005) analyzed what he calls magic or witchcraft practiced among the Azande – people of Sudan – and, like Malinowski, also drew attention to the presence of Zande magic in the various dimensions of native life. In the anthropologist's view, witchcraft is a psychic act and should not be taken in the sense of "primitive mentality". On the contrary, Evans-Pritchard states that, through witchcraft, the Azande express behavior and a way of thinking about the world that is consistent with their code of morality.

In short, even though methodological aspects were innovated by this first generation of anthropologists, their proposals for the analysis of religious and/or magical practices, whose emphasis fell on the thinking or the meaning of things, were perpetuated for generations to come following the example of Geertz (1981). In my view, even though they have focused attention on practices in different contexts, what was observed by the researchers ended up being described based on one of the components of the empirical universe: the native discourse.

In this sense, when native speeches absolutize the ethnography analytical potentialities are simplified because, when questioned by the anthropologist, what the native says does not result purely and simply from a mental operation nor it is restricted to offering a meaning as if it were a product ready and packed for dissemination. In addition, reducing discursive constructions to the scope of the meaning of things ends up supplanting the materialization of things themselves in images, sounds, smells and bodies all of them also present in empiricism. The question

that arises is: how to make these materialities ethnographic without, after all, reducing everything to discourse analysis?

OTHER APPROACHES

Returning to the sentence that starts the article, religion is present in many places and, just as it appears in temples or "sacred" books, it is not restricted to these media since it can also be seen in photographs, music, bodies, architectures , food, parties, radio, television and, more recently, on the internet on whose social medias many audiovisual productions on religion are posted daily. As I stated earlier, even though religious practices are constituted by material forms or media I note that this materiality is still little used as an object of research by those who investigate the subject.

More recently, some new trends in the field of anthropology have started to propose this classic methodology. A group of anthropologists who created the Religious Matters in an Entangled World[5] research project – started in 2016 at the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands – has been criticizing the academic tradition that has devoted itself to the religious issue. By valuing a method that prioritizes a material approach to religion, these scientists understand religion itself as a media that acquires presence on the public scene through the constitutive materiality of its practices: image, object, food, body, sound, smell, architecture, etc. (Janeja 2016, Meyer 2019, Schlatmann 2017, Svasek & Meyer 2016, van de Port 2012).

According to Birgit Meyer (2019), one of the project's coordinators, the proposed study method contradict the already established theories of communication, expanding the notion of media beyond the technological scope of photography, cinema, radio and television. It also breaks with the "mentalist" tradition based on which the field of the humanities, relying on semantic and indebted approaches to the Enlightenment, emphasized the content and meaning of things, criticizing religion according to the notions of "fictitious illusion" and "false conscience" given the theoretical embarrassment produced by scholars such as Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud.

Still in the view of Utrecht researchers, this tradition established contrasts between belief and meaning which supposedly cover the immateriality of "spirit" on the one hand and issues involving power, practices and materiality on the other, reifying the secularist idea through which religion was designed for the realm of interiorization and the private. On the contrary to this perspective, Religious Matters in an Entangled World propose to exercise criticism from an "inside" point of view using

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5. https://religiousmatters.nl/

a methodology that shows the agency of bodies, shared sensations and emotions in the construction of worlds.

The sedimentation of the material approach resulted from the concerns of scholars who, when researching post-colonial contexts and religious diversity, found a presence of religion in public life and, to describe and analyze this presence, brought the notion of media closer to the religious field from the perception of a process they call "aesthetic formation". To arrive at this formulation, anthropologists started from their respective fields of research. Meyer, for example, realized a proliferation of pentecostal and charismatic churches in southern Ghana from the 1990s onwards.

According to the anthropologist, these churches were the result of the formation of "mediatized religious communities" whose participants, when incorporating audiovisual mass media in their practices, achieved visibility on the public scene. The notion of media, according to Meyer, instead of being restricted to the already known electronic means, should be expanded to understand the place of the material dimension in the field of religious experience, a place that consists of authorized forms of visibility of religion according to historically and contextually constructed political arrangements. It is in this line of reasoning that the author considers religion itself as a practice of mediation.

> One of the advantages of understanding religion as a practice of mediation is that it no longer takes the practices, objects and other forms through which it manifests itself in the world as secondary to beliefs, meanings and values, but as forms necessary for through which the "beyond" becomes accessible or the "invisible" becomes "apparent" (Meyer 2019, 209-210).

The background to the debate proposed by Meyer is the criticism of tradition, mentioned earlier, that conceived the notion of materiality in opposition to everything that would come to be identified as religion. As a historically situated concept, materiality arose in opposition to the God of Christian theology. Furthermore, a field of ideas built around iconoclasm, when Catholics and Protestants clashed in the wake of the disputes that culminated in the Protestant Reformation movement, not only dematerialized the study of religion but also bequeathed a set of categories to the social sciences – totem, idol and fetish – from which intellectuality, in the name of reason, promoted a separation between people and things.

> The defense of materiality indicates the need to pay urgent attention to a world of real and material objects and to a texture of lived and embodied experience (Meyer 2019, 88).

In short, for Utrecht researchers, the lived and embodied experience stems from materialities that form an aesthetic. Unlike the Kantian notion of beauty the sense of aesthetics they alluded to goes back to Aristotle who conceives aesthetics from a sensory point of view or as a sensation. In this analytical key taking up the case of the IURD, as stated earlier, the media materialized the image of Edir Macedo promoting a mediation between the figure of the pastor and the audience of Universal through the sensory effects that the image itself produces. In other words, more than a concept this image is best translated as a sensation manufactured and shared by material forms that together agreed on an iurdian style.

CONCLUSION

Given all that has been discussed, it is worth asking how to approach the religious question from material or media forms. As there is no ready answer, several paths could be pointed out remembering that from an anthropological point of view and taking into account the proposals of researchers that intersect religion, media and the formation of communities, as in the case of Birgit Meyer, ethnography is still the device through which the exercise of describing and analyzing a set of relationships can lead us to dismantle already seen methods when the researched topic concerns religion.

As discussed, the speeches of the religious actors as well as the meanings that they give to the practices should not be the guiding thread of the ethnography. The media themselves come to occupy the prominent place when from the media images, sounds, gestures, flavors and smell they produce feelings shared by the actors who are part of a certain religious community. Thus, the symbolic sphere should not be considered as data but as the result of a manufacturing process – a metaphor constantly mentioned by Meyer – because, according to the anthropologist, what has come to be called sacred or supernatural or spiritual is a dimension manufactured by things that, in turn, touch the sensory field of those who relate to such dimension within an aesthetic formation process.

In short, media are useful materials to build hypotheses or even turn more ethnographic the process of formation of the community that gathers in a set of "sacred temples" – the IURD – as well as the possible relationships established between the religious actors and Edir Macedo. Universal's media apparatus reveals how marketing around the pastor's presence impacts the way churchgoers exhibit their own trajectories for example in some commercials on Rede Record television: the sober way of dressing, the modulation in speaking, the exhibition of material conquests from a tragic situation reversed by a "divine grace", etc. Therefore, not only the figure of leadership does matter; the performance of his followers also becomes a rich material for investigation.

There are many challenges to be faced when opting for a material approach to religion since the interlocutors, if they research the topic from a phenomenological or conceptual perspective, will certainly question the arguments for an "after all, what does it mean?". If possible responses to this type of provocation are not able to justify that processes of meaning, belief or imagination – as proposed by Benedict Andersen (2008) – under no circumstances are sufficient for the formation of a religious community, certainly the material dimension will fall overland. However, if instead of ideas shared sensations are valued then the materialities that manufacture such sensations will start to matter.

TRANSLATION
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