

6.5 Challenging canonical orthodoxy: Do-it-yourself cultures break into religion

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A b s t r a c t

The purpose of this presentation is to show how the religious sphere is being increasingly colonized by do-it-yourself cultures (DIY). Free from following traditional precepts, individuals find themselves in a position to give wings to spirituality, distant from institutional belongingness and belief. Antithetical to the conventional religious practitioner, “moving figures” arise. These are characterized by the detachment of believing and belonging and by the idea of spirituality as a possibility for building identities, independent of what is seen as “true faith” or “authorized faith”. Even in the field of religion, DIY cultures enable the construction of post-traditional identities; therefore, “religious bricoleurs” are open to different gender performances and to the discussion of taboo themes related to sexuality. Consequently, it’s not surprising that the DIY practices maintain an underground and anti-hegemonic position in the sphere of institutionalized religions.

Keywords: *Religion, DIY cultures, bricolage, gender performance.*



This presentation is part of a bigger research that arises from a large amount of data showing the fast decline of Catholicism in Brazil. The exposure may start boring, with some boring numbers, but it's just to expose how the national demography points out to the continuous and increasingly decline in the number of Brazilian citizens claiming to be Catholics. The decline began somewhat shy: in 1940, Catholics accounted for 95.2% of the Brazilian population; in the following decade, this number fell to 93.7%; in the year 1960, Catholics were 93.1% of the total population; in 1970, 91.1% of Brazilians declared themselves Catholic; a decade later, that number was 89.2%, and in 1991 it fell to 83.3%. With the beginning of the new millennium, there were vertiginous declines: in 2000, the percentage of those declaring themselves Catholic declined by almost 10% and came to 73.8% of the national population (Pierucci, 2004); the same pattern of decline continued a decade later, reaching the current statistics of 64.6% (Menchen & Brisolla, 2012).

For the first time, the absolute number of Catholic supporters declined, from 125.5 million in the year of 2000 to 123.3 million in 2010. A loss of 2.2 million devotees during a period in which Brazilian population experienced an increase of more than 20 million persons (Steil & Toniol, 2013, p. 232).

If, until the 1970s, "all Brazilians were Catholic", nowadays, on the other hand, there is a very fast decline in the number of devotees, a phenomenon that occurs in conjunction with the collapse of a cultural heritage common to various layers of the society. Cultural heritage, yes, but also clerical heritage, because it came from a church that tried to give to Brazilians, indistinctly, the hallmark of "Catholics by nature", "Catholics from the beginning", "Catholics in the roots" (Pierucci, 2005).

With this collapse of the collective memory, representatives of Catholicism see a reduction in the possibilities of spreading their faith (Cardoso, 2016). The once "Catholic nation" is characterized, today, by vigorous struggles between a declining majority faith and its rising minority competitors. But the collapse of the collective memory may not be deleterious only to the dominant religious institution. As a consequence of the strengthening of an individualistic ethic, it is verified that the symbols of religious institutions become a material available to particular devotions. Indeed, it is quite possible to say that it is a gradual process of bricolage (Hervieu-Léger, 2008, p. 41), in which private choices rule over collective belief systems. The religious scenario is colonized by a do-it-yourself culture (DIY). At this culture, each individual sets up his or her own spiritual life. Released from following traditional precepts, individuals find themselves in a position to give wings to spirituality that is distant from institutional belongingness and belief.

At first glance, this turn off from religious institutions has as main target the majority creeds. However, there is no indicative that shows minor confessions as immune in this deviation from normalized spiritualities. Individualism stresses the truths of any faith authorized by specialists, since the very necessity of an external authorization, beyond the individual, undergoes a process of cultural devaluation - and this occurs independent of the background of these specialists, whether they represent majoritarian or marginal creeds.

Danièle Hervieu-Léger notes that, since "the greatness of modern societies" (Hervieu-Léger, 2003, p. 2) implied the construction of an anthropological profile based on autonomy, the historical cultural result was an ethics based on radical individuality. In this sense, it is possible to talk about a properly modern spirituality, far from the ideal type of the regular believer. Hervieu-Léger (2008)

typifies the figure of the regular believer as that one well-defined in relation to his religious linkage, as well as in relation to the values and norms to follow, which are always those of the institution to which he belongs by inheritance. In opposition to this ideal type, “moving figures” arise (Hervieu-Léger, 2003, p. 31). These are characterized by the non-connection between believing and belonging and by the idea of spirituality as a possibility of building identities, independently of what is seen as “true faith” or “authorized faith”. The diversity of religious traditions appears as nothing more than reserves of symbolic suggestions, *à la carte*, in which the individual can enjoy comfortably, exercising the creativity of bricoleur.

So, the space achieved by DIY spiritualities is understandable. These devotions not only do not impose themselves on the individual, but also are authenticated by him or her in the personal journey amid the various experiences of his or her biography. Before proceeding, it should be clarified that these religiosities have an individualist foundation, but they have it in the sense of being constituted by the valorization of possibilities of individual autonomy. This does not mean that they are individualistic in the sense that they are fatally cultivated from “petty-bourgeois” goals, restricted to the satisfaction of private and hidden needs. In a DIY logic, religious traditions are seen as theological deposits, with a wide range of free symbols available to be enjoyed according to the needs of the moment, whether such needs are restricted to the domestic sphere or directed to the public sphere.

In this regard, the theologian Chung Hyun Kyung, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York and lecturer of the World Council of Churches, comes to mind. Kyung adopts a posture that she calls “syncretic”, as opposed to standardized religious cultures (Stewart & Shaw, 2005, p.16). Not only her works, but also her devotions seek to juxtapose a Christian Presbyterian doctrinal arsenal to postulates of Islamic mysticism, Zen Buddhism, Latin American Catholicism, as well as other devotional traditions seen as equally relevant. Based on this syncretism, Kyung militates in favor of interreligious dialogue, but also concentrates on ecological causes, third-world issues and feminist concerns (Kyung, 2009, p. 175). A charismatic figure in her own country, she has produced and starred a number of programs on Korean television with the aim of giving visibility to the feminist struggle by using many religious teachings that are dear to her.

Also, it is possible to cite the Brazilian case of the Ecumenical Youth Network (REJU in the Portuguese initials), one more example of DIY religiosities that inform actions in the public sphere. It is a coalition that has as a striking feature its progressive political interventions, which are carried out based on the encouragement promoted by different forms of spirituality (Silva, 2016, p. 84). The Network has as its thematic axis, among others, the confrontation with the physical, moral and symbolic violence that afflicts women, homosexuals and transsexuals (Silva, 2016, p. 14). During these struggles, militants rely on inspirations ranging from the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé to Buddhism, through Judaism, all in bricolage with the majority Christian teachings. This interreligious stance, coupled with the discussion of taboo themes such as abortion and gay marriage, makes the REJU assume an underground and anti-hegemonic position in the scenario of institutionalized religions. As can be seen from the foregoing, even in the field of religion, DIY cultures give power to the construction of post-traditional identities; due to that possibility, “religious bricoleurs” are able to cast doubt on several moral dogmas.

Funding: This work was supported by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) under Grant number 140161/2016-3.

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