

TWO FACES OF GOD: RELIGION AND SOCIAL CLASS  
IN THE BRAZILIAN DIASPORA IN SYDNEY

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Brazilian immigration to Australia has two defining moments. The first migrants arrived in the early 1970s, attracted by an Australian Government assistance scheme. These were poor migrants and today still belong to the working class. The second group started arriving in the late 1990s. By contrast with the first group, these are young professionals who are highly educated and belong to the upper-middle class. They usually migrate as students (and end up staying) or in search of a better lifestyle. Indeed, most of the new migrants I interviewed told me they thought of migrating to either Canada or Australia, but decided for Australia because of the warm weather and the beach culture. They usually take up professional jobs in Australia (they work as doctors, dentists, teachers, lawyers and so on). More often than not, they migrate individually, speak English and socialise with and marry Australians. Following the immense gap between the educated and uneducated/wealthy and poor in Brazilian society, the community in Australia is internally fractured between these two groups.

Brazil was traditionally a country that received inflows of migrants. However, in the last two decades the flow has been reversed. Since the early 1980s, many Brazilians have emigrated due socio-economic crisis of the period, which has led to massive social inequalities, rampant crime and violence. The best translation of this fact into numbers is that while the top 10 percent of the Brazilian population accounts for nearly 50 percent of all individual income, the bottom 70 percent earns about 25 percent (Eakin 1998: 182). In fact, according to a 1995 World Bank study, 'Brazil has the most unequal distribution of wealth of any country in the world; the richest 20 percent of the population earn twenty-six times as much as the poorest 20 percent of the nation (the comparative figure for India is 5 to 1, and 11 to 1 in the United States)' (Eakin 1998: 188). According to a 2000 census of Foreign Consulates undertaken by the Brazilian Ministry

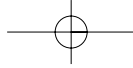
of External Affairs, 1.5 million Brazilians had left the country. Of these, 800,000 were residing in the US (Margolis 2003: 45) and 254,000 in Japan (Sasaki 2002).<sup>1</sup> An earlier assessment (1996) by the same Ministry also mentioned 460,846 Brazilians living in Paraguay, and 174,544 in Europe (Sasaki 1999: 244). Given that the number of Brazilians residing overseas has increased by 20 percent annually since the 1980s, North American anthropologist Maxine Margolis argues that 'to leave Brazil is no longer the isolated decision of individuals [. . .] to try to better their lives in another country; it is a national trend' (Margolis 2003: 45).

There has been extensive scholarly study of the Brazilian diasporic communities in the US (Margolis 1994, 1998, 2003; Martes 1999; Rocha Reis and Sales 1999; Sales 1999a, 1999b, 2004) and Japan (Lesser 2003; Linger 2001; Roth 2002; Tsuda 2003; Yamanaka 2000), but nothing has been written on Brazilians in Australia. One such reason is that although there was some migration in the early 1970s, Australia has just recently become a major choice of destination.

Here I examine the religious practices of the two distinct groups of Brazilian migrants in Sydney by looking at the World Revival Church—Assembly of God (Avivamento Mundial), a Brazilian Pentecostal Church, and a Spiritist centre called Seed of Light. I argue that migrants' religious choice in the host country reflects their location in the Brazilian social hierarchy. In Brazil, as in Australia, Evangelicalism is the religion of choice of disenfranchised classes, whereas French Spiritism is a middle-class phenomenon. Significantly, the class divisions among Brazilian immigrants are also spatialised and this is evident in the location of their respective churches and congregations in Sydney. The Pentecostals congregate in the lower middle-class suburb of Earlwood, while the Spiritists meet in the more gentrified and cosmopolitan suburb of Bondi. The language ability and differences of income are the main reasons for choice of dwelling. The first wave of immigrants settled mainly in or around Petersham (a suburb close to Earlwood), where there is an extensive Portuguese migrant community. That is so because the 1970s migrants, who could not speak English, were able to communicate and have basic services (doctors, grocery shops, etc) that catered for them in

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<sup>1</sup> In Japan, Brazilians comprise the third largest foreign community after the Koreans (635,269), and Chinese (335,575) (Sasaki 2002).



Petersham. Their lack of language skills has also restricted their socialising beyond the community. By contrast, the new wave of migrants is able to afford English language courses once they arrive in the country, or already are familiar with the language.

This difference of insertion in Australian society is also visible in the heads of both the Spiritist centre and the World Revival Church. While the people of the board of the Spiritist centre speak English fluently, are professionals, and are mostly married to Australians, the minister of the World Revival Church does not speak English, comes from the lower echelons of Brazilian society, and migrated with his family. In this context, I contend that social class plays a more meaningful role than ethnicity in this diasporic community.

#### SPIRITISM IN BRAZIL

Although Brazil is known as 'the world's largest Catholic nation', this description ignores the presence of many other religions and religious practices that have been introduced and creolised in Brazil since the Portuguese arrived in 1500 bringing with them Roman Catholicism.

French Spiritism was first introduced into Brazil by the Brazilian elite in the late nineteenth century. Following an aspiration towards modernity, Brazilian elites were quick to embrace the then latest French fashion. This is not surprising since France was a metropolitan centre in the nineteenth century no less than the United States has been in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Spiritism or Kardecism, as it is known in Brazil due to its founder Hyppolyte Rivail's pen name Allan Kardec (1804–69), was itself a synthesis of many religious practices such as Catholicism, Protestantism, and occult philosophies that flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe such as Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry and Theosophy.

At the core of the Spiritist doctrine is the idea of spiritual evolution through reincarnation, as Kardec was very much influenced by the positivist ideas of the nineteenth century. According to Kardec, the spirit, created by God, would go through several reincarnations until

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this, see Jeffrey Needell (1987). *A Tropical Belle Epoque: Elite, Culture and Society in Turn-of-the-Century Rio de Janeiro*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

it achieved perfection. Karma, and its corollary, the law of cause and effect, would determine reincarnation: if one's actions in a past life were negative, one would reincarnate into a life of suffering (through poverty, disease, unhappiness). By contrast, if one practiced charity in a past life (a concept Kardec drew from Christianity), one would reincarnate into a life of happiness. In this context, free will plays a key role, as human beings may choose what path to take in their lives. As a result, the evolution of the spirit would depend solely on its own choice and effort (Cavalcanti 1990: 147–155; Hess 1991; 1994).

By deploying a scientific discourse affirming its tenets, Spiritism has drawn followers from white, educated elites. Indeed, Brazilian sociologist Lísias Nogueira Negrão noted: “Spiritism is a literate religion. More than a religion, Spiritism claims to be science, philosophy. Because of its high powers of persuasion in deploying logic, it is adopted by higher educated social classes” (cited in Varella 2000). Currently, Spiritism is so widespread in the country that according to anthropologist José Jorge de Carvalho, “In many aspects, the Spiritist world-view became part of the national ethos, as much as Catholicism, and more recently Protestantism” (Carvalho 1994: 74). The latest census data showed that Spiritism is still expanding: while in 1991 it had 1.6 million followers, by 2000 the number increased to 2.3 million.

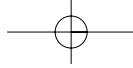
#### PENTECOSTALISM IN BRAZIL

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Brazilian religious universe has changed in degree, extension and speed never before seen in our history [. . .] particularly in the areas where the country is modernised and has established rational and secular patterns. This process of expansion of Pentecostalism, Spiritism, and Umbanda<sup>3</sup> is the counterpart of the decline and erosion of the traditionally dominating religion—Catholicism (Pierucci and Prandi 1996: 10).

Despite the predominance of Catholicism in Brazil, the proportion of persons who declared being Catholics fell from 83.8% in the 1991 census to 73.8% in the 2000 census. Evangelicalism (including tradi-

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<sup>3</sup> Umbanda emerged in the early twentieth century as a quintessential Brazilian religious creation. It deployed elements of the main religious traditions of the country: Catholicism, Spiritism, and indigenous and African traditions. For more on Umbanda, see Diane Brown (1994). *Umbanda Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil*. New York: Columbia University Press.



tional Protestant, Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals) is the main denomination in expansion. This group has the second largest percentage in the 2000 census, and has raised its membership from 9% of the population in 1991, to 15.4% in 2000. Brazil is presently the second largest Protestant country in the world and the largest Pentecostal one (Freston 2001: 198). Indeed, research conducted by ISER<sup>4</sup> in the city of Rio de Janeiro found that from 1990 to 1992, 673 new Protestant churches were established of which 90% were Pentecostal. In the same period, only one Catholic church was established (Pereira 2000: 16).<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, a survey conducted in São Paulo city in 1995 depicts a revealing picture of the class divisions according to religious affiliation in Brazil (Prandi 1996b: 262–266). The survey showed that 30% of those who converted to Pentecostalism came from the lowest echelons of society. It also showed that the proportion of blacks and mulattos ('pardos'), which comprise the poorest sectors of the Brazilian population, is larger among the Pentecostal stratum of Evangelicalism. In addition, 60% of the Catholics are white,<sup>6</sup> 40% are Afro-Brazilians and 13% have tertiary education; 73% of Spiritists are white, 5% are Afro-Brazilians, and 34% have tertiary education; 52% of the Evangelicals are white, 16% are Afro-Brazilians and 5% have tertiary education; finally, 50% of the Pentecostal are white, 14% Afro-Brazilians and only 2% have tertiary education. From this picture, it is clear that while Spiritists and Catholics belong to the upper echelons of society, Evangelicals and Pentecostals are among the lower sectors.

Many scholars have argued that the expansion of Evangelical, Pentecostal and mediumship religions is a consequence of the modernising and secularising trends of the Church following the Vatican II Council (1962–1965). The shift to a more tolerant attitude to other religions after Vatican II facilitated the expansion of religious pluralism (Carpenter 1999: 246; Roof 1999: 65). Brazilian sociologists Pierucci and Prandi add another significant reason for 'migration' away from the Catholic Church. According to them, while the

<sup>4</sup> ISER is the Portuguese acronym for Institute for Religious Studies.

<sup>5</sup> For accounts of the expansion of Protestantism in Latin America, see David Martin (1991). *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America*. Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell; David Stoll (1990). *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>6</sup> Those who descend from European migrants are considered 'white'.

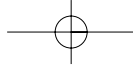
Catholic Church ironically made its 'preferential option for the poor'—which in Brazil took the form of Liberation Theology and the *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base* (Base Communities)—this very action that made it less attractive to that sector of society (Pierucci and Prandi 1996: 16–18).<sup>7</sup> By emphasising politics, social issues and collective interests, while stripping itself of the sacred, miracles, and healing practices, the Church lost territory to religious traditions that emphasise the latter (Prandi 1996a: 24, 29).

A more recent development is the globalisation of Brazilian Pentecostal churches. The Pentecostal expansion follows the diaspora by sending missionaries to the host countries. In 1997, the weekly magazine *Veja* mentioned 1700 Pentecostal missionaries overseas (April 23, 1997). Of the Pentecostal churches, the Assembly of God, Deus é Amor (God is Love), and Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God) have the most significant international presence, while the latter is the largest Brazilian Pentecostal church overseas (Freston 1999: 385).

THE WORLD REVIVAL CHURCH—ASSEMBLY OF GOD  
(AVIVAMENTO MUNDIAL)

Paul Freston has observed that 'global Pentecostalism is culturally polycentric' (2001: 196), that is, there is no single centre from which its flows originate. Although it is markedly a church of Brazilians and for Brazilians in Australia, the Sydney World Revival Church—Assembly of God has its centre in the USA. This branch of the Assembly of God was established by the Brazilian Pastor Ouriel de Jesus in 1985 in Boston to cater to the fast-growing Brazilian migrant population there. Since then, his World Revival Church—Assembly of God has expanded its membership to 15,000 and has over 70 congregations throughout the United States and in 17 other countries around the world including Canada, Mexico, Brazil, England, France, Portugal, Russia, the Ukraine, Japan, and Australia. In fact, the Sydney minister was appointed to his position by Pastor De Jesus. Minister Juarez told me that he was working in a little town in

<sup>7</sup> For a very good account in English on the decline of Liberation Theology in Brazil, see Manuel Vásquez (1998). *The Brazilian Popular Church and the Crisis of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



southern Brazil when, after a mystic vision, he received a phone call inviting him to become a missionary in Australia. His connections with the church headquarters are strong. He goes to Boston frequently for the annual biblical teaching, where he meets Brazilian missionaries who, like himself, are working overseas.

The Sydney branch of the World Revival Church—Assembly of God was first established by another Brazilian minister sent by De Jesus in 1994. According to Pastor Juarez, the church had only 12 adherents for the first two years. After his arrival in 1996, it has now expanded to 120 members. Besides its headquarters in Earlwood, it has also much smaller missions in Wollongong and Gosford (in New South Wales) and Canberra (the capital city). The priest himself told me that members belong to disenfranchised classes. However, following a Protestant ethic which values social mobility and hard work,<sup>8</sup> Minister Juarez told me proudly:

Members here are from lower classes. But things are changing. When I arrived, only two of the twelve members had jobs. The rest were unemployed in a country full of jobs. Today, they are all employed, own their homes, and have two cars! We have about four or five small business men who are doing very well for the glory of God. They were all addicted to drugs, alcoholics, and prostitutes. Today they have been transformed by God into family men and businessmen (Personal communication, February 1, 2004).

This praising of material success by the priest dovetails with migrant desires of upward mobility. Upon finding that there are proportionally more evangelicals in the Brazilian diaspora in the US than in Brazil itself, anthropologist Ana Cristina Braga Martes argued that the reason for this is the overlapping of the Evangelical discourse of success and migrants' aspirations (Martes 1999: 91). Comparing the Catholic and Evangelical churches of the Brazilian diasporic community in the US, Martes has shown that the Brazilian Evangelical churches are much more visible since their meetings and proselytisation are transmitted on cable channels in the Boston area (Martes 1999: 89). Unlike the Brazilian community in the US, here the existing fracture in the community means that such access to the media is not easy. Minister Juarez was not happy when he told me in an interview

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<sup>8</sup> This 'theology of prosperity', which praises hard working and saving, is a common feature of the Pentecostal churches in Brazil.

that he has constantly been denied access to both the SBS<sup>9</sup> radio program in Portuguese as well as to the Brazilian community newsletter.<sup>10</sup> According to him, while the Spiritist centre's activities are extensively advertised in both, he cannot get any media space even if he offers to pay for it. As an explanation for this he said,

I am sure there is prejudice there. If people invite you for a soccer game, you go; if they invite you to a Spiritist meeting, you go. But if they invite you to go to the [Evangelical] church and you go, there is always someone else who says: 'Don't go there! Be careful, or you'll convert!' I mean, the person can become Spiritist, can become a thief, can [sic] become anything, but not Evangelical. So it is very difficult! (Personal communication, February 1, 2004).

I suggest that this situation is due to both media being controlled by educated Brazilians who belong to the later wave of immigration. For instance, the manager of SBS Portuguese language radio program was a lecturer at a university in Brazil and had been a journalist for more than a decade before migrating in 1998. In Brazil, most upper middle-class people would have reservations against the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches because of their voracity in proselytising and their animosity towards any other religious affiliation. For instance, Freston notes that an opinion poll conducted in 1996 found that the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God had the lowest approval rating of the main Brazilian institutions, only 17% (Freston 2001: 199). Martes corroborates this negative image. She has observed that "the 'non-Evangelicals' tend to regard evangelicals as fanatics (because "they are at the church all the time" and "cannot drink or dance"), credulous and ignorant (because they believe in miracles) and silly (because they give money to the priest)" (Martes 1999: 115).

#### SEED OF LIGHT—THE SPIRITIST CENTRE

Seed of Light was established in 1994 in Summer Hill, Sydney. It moved to a rented and renovated garage in Bondi in 2000. According

<sup>9</sup> SBS (Special Broadcast Service) is Australia's multicultural and multilingual public broadcaster.

<sup>10</sup> Since then the board of the Brazilian Community Council of Australia (BraCCA) has changed its mind. When I interviewed its board members, I was told that in an effort to patch up internal divisions between the two groups and therefore to represent the entire community, they have given this Pentecostal church room to advertise in its newsletter.

to members of the board, it has around 100 registered members. Most followers told me that they found the centre through the internet. Some, who were Spiritists in Brazil, did their *google* search and contacted the centre even before leaving the homeland. By contrast, the World Revival Church of Earlwood does not have a website and the priest told me that he does not use email or the computer to contact his congregation. The ability to navigate the internet and computer literacy evinces the social class of its membership.

Furthermore, not only does Seed of Light have a website, but it constantly works with email. Spiritist centres usually have a group of mediums (*colegiados*) whom one can consult for one's personal problems. Since the centre in Sydney is fairly small and does not have a large body of mediums, members and visitors can have their queries sent by email to a larger centre in Brazil. There, once in trance, the *colegiados* will ask the spirits about the migrant's problems. The responses will then be sent via email to the Sydney centre. Moreover, two more recent and smaller centres established in Melbourne and in Canberra also email their members' queries to the Sydney centre, so that it can forward them to Brazil. The Sydney centre also gives support to these smaller centres in the way of books, proselytising material, and managerial ideas.

Importantly, the internet also connects Seed of Light with the Spiritist Group of New York (SGNY), a Spiritist centre established by the Brazilian community in that city.<sup>11</sup> Having been established a decade earlier, the NY centre assists the Sydney centre with managerial ideas as well as proselytising material. Seed of Light buys books translated into English for its non-Portuguese speaking membership from the SGNY. As a recent development, the NY centre has asked its Sydney counterpart to join efforts and translate books into English.

To be sure, although the World Revival Church does not use the internet, it is closely connected with the World Revival Church in Boston. Not only are the priests in contact through travel between the two locations, but the Sydney congregation is connected to the Boston one through video tapes of festivities and proselytisation in the Boston church.

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<sup>11</sup> This Spiritist centre can be viewed at [www.sgny.org](http://www.sgny.org)

## SUPPORT NETWORK

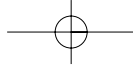
Both the World Revival Church and Seed of Light Spiritist centre work as a support network to help Brazilians cope with the pressures and anxieties of migration. For instance, in one of my visits to the World Revival Church, the minister asked the congregation to donate money to help pay the hospital bill of one of its members. The Afro-Brazilian woman had arrived in Australia recently and had to undergo an emergency heart surgery. She, however, was not eligible for *Medicare* (the national medical scheme) and did not have much money, as she was working as a nanny. Moreover, minister Juarez also told me in an interview that he gives counselling to people who have drinking and gambling problems, as well as to couples in difficulties. He added,

People feel lonely; they don't see any value in themselves or in their lives. They live from home to work, to shopping, to home, to work, and so forth. They have no perspective in life. When they meet Jesus, they see how important they are, they realise they can help others, and do lots of things in life (Personal communication, February 1, 2004).

The members of Seed of Light also help migrants through their problems of adaptation to the host country and loneliness. However, they see these difficulties not as a lack of Jesus in their lives, but as psychological and emotional issues. Such explanation evinces the upper middle or middle class to which the Spiritist congregation belongs. A member, who is an optical engineer and works for a transnational corporation, told me,

Sometimes this anxiety of being away from home can become serious, even become a panic disorder. This anxiety has to do with psychology. There are some cases that the person is so unhappy with life that s/he tries suicide. [. . .] The more tools you give people to realise they are not in the best path, the better. Be it spiritually (if the person believes) or only psychologically, [the important thing is that] people need to talk and assuage their pain. We are here to advise, to show that there are other people who are on the same path, or that have been there but were able to change the situation. We need to show that s/he is not alone in the world. The help comes from the *colegiado* in Brazil and us here (Personal communication, April 13, 2004).

Although the problems are similar to the migrants who belong to the Pentecostal Church, solutions are distinct. While at the church learning about Jesus seems to relieve the pain, at the Spiritist centre



there are two members of the congregation—a Brazilian psychologist and a Brazilian naturopath, who volunteer to help people who come to the centre in need. As mentioned before, their queries are also sent to the mediums in Brazil. When asked what kind of prescriptions are usually given, the same member told me that the usual advice is reading the doctrine at home, have particular laying of hands (*passé*) and prayers.

To be sure, both religious institutions function as a place where migrants can speak their language, meet others in the same situation, make friends and feel at home. Indeed, many people I interviewed told me they were not religious in Brazil, but because of the difficulties in adapting to the new environment, they had looked for a religious institution. Martes observed the same phenomenon among migrants in the US (Martes 1999: 113). People become members to have a sense of belonging in the host country.

#### CONCLUSION

By looking at Brazilian migrants' religious practices in Australia, I showed that social class is more significant than ethnicity in their manifestation in the host country. Due to the enormous gap between the wealthy and poor in Brazil, migrants' position in the social hierarchy in the homeland, and the correlate religion of choice, were carried to the host country. I showed that social class influenced their place of residence, language skills, jobs and relation with Australian society.

Furthermore, both the World Revival Church and the Spiritist centre have strong global connections. While the former is actively expanding globally by sending missionaries overseas, the latter was established by migrants themselves and does not have a missionary vision. Such connections among the Brazilian diasporic communities in the US, Australia and the homeland reveal the complexities at play in interpreting processes of globalisation of cultural flows. The existence of inflows and counterflows of ideas among these three countries attest to the rhizomatic nature of the globalisation process (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), where the West is only one of the nodes from where global cultural flows emanate. In a rhizome, 'centres' and 'peripheries' have relational locations; centres can become peripheries and vice-versa. Although Protestantism arrived in Brazil

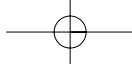
from the US, it has now taken its own Brazilian distinctive shape, which in turn, has been carried back to the US and other countries where Brazilians arrived. By the same token, Spiritism, which originated in France, was appropriated in Brazil and has produced shoots in other countries.

Finally, both religious sites work as support networks by offering a vicarious home away from home. As Ghassan Hage has argued, 'intimations of lost homelands . . . should be seen as "affective building blocks" used by migrants to make themselves feel at home where they actually are' (Hage 1998: 104). In this context, by adhering to a religious institution from the homeland and spending time with their peers, migrants reconstruct the past through the standpoint of the present in order to feel at home. These religious sites would be a safe base from which to confront life in the new country. Indeed, Hage noted that 'positively experienced nostalgia does not necessarily involve a desire to "go back"; more often than not, . . . it is a desire of being there *here*' (Hage 1998: 108). Although each religion supports migrants in different ways according to their diverse social insertions, they help them to make sense of their diasporic condition by offering a safe space for exchange of migrant experiences and spiritual counsel.

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