

Christian Witness in a multi-religious World: A View from Brazil

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The religious landscape of Brazil: A short introduction

Martinho da Vila is a Samba musician with his own extensive musical repertoire. One of his compositions with the title „Religious Syncretism“ is a homage to the cultural and ethnical diversity of the Brazilian nation. When he sings: „*This Brazilian, ethnically diverse, ecumenical and religiously syncretistic people ...*“, he describes in musical terms the typical Brazilian religious mix, which represents a mixture of Catholicism with afro-Brazilian and indigenous folk religion. These different expressions of faith have for a long time been regarded as the „foundation of Brazilian religious expression“ (Camurça 2009, p. 174/175). In the meantime the Pentecostal movement in the 60s and 70s and the Neo-Pentecostalism of the 80es und 90s have consolidated and led to a new definition of Brazilian religious expression which is characterised by the decline of Catholicism (Giumbelli 2007, p. 149).

The results of the census in 2010 made this particularly clear. For the first time figures showed that the increase of Catholics in the population decreased as against general population growth. According to the census figures 64.6% of the population regarded themselves as Catholics, which means that Catholicism can longer be considered the religion of the people of Brazil, but only as a religion of the majority of the Brazilian nation (Faustino 2014, p. 23).

While the number of people who identified themselves with the Catholic faith decreased, at the same time the number of those who considered themselves to be Protestants, increased. Currently the percentage of Protestants in the population of Brazil is 22.2% or 42.2 million people (Teixera, 2014, S. 24).

It is necessary to stress the diversity represented by the Protestants in Brazil. The Brazilian Geography and Statistics Institute differentiates between three different groups; the Protestant mission (Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Congregationalists, Baptists und Adventists), the Pentecostal movement and the Evangelicals (not belonging to any denomination). Of these three

groups the Pentecostals represent 60%, the Protestant mission 18.5% and the non-denominational Evangelicals 21.8%.

The Evangelicals, who are on the rise, proclaim a faith that aims at healing, exorcism and prosperity (von Sinner 2013, p. 10). It is the direction taken by the Pentecostals, the Neo-Pentecostals und the Charismatics. Their religion aims to work directly and is not intended to found congregations (von Sinner, 2013, p. 11). Their churches are run as a business model and they make use of media and advertising campaigns in order to proselytize and to enter into spiritual battle with other directions of the Christian faith.

Neo-Pentecostal churches spread a theology of prosperity and make use of the language symbols of free market enterprise and competition in their cosmology (Lima, 2005, p. 148). Setbacks are considered the work of the devil who is to be fought against. The believer is part of God's plan (Oro, 2001, p. 82). Thus everything that concerns healing, sickness, work place and even the reconciliation of a married couple is set in relation to God.

The most obvious fact is that this Brazilian religious diversity is taking on more and more the characteristics of an uncontrolled religious market, which gives privilege to a missionary imperative clothed as free competition and doing away with tradition. (Pierruci 2014, p. 53). A further characteristic is the conviction that God has a political project in store for the nation. For this reason the political stage is used for missionary activities.

The plan of the power of God starts with Abraham in the Old Testament. For the Neo-Pentecostals Israel is at the centre of everything that God plans for this world. For them the founding of the state of Israel and especially the last thirty years have meant a gigantic revelation of the gospel (Macedo, 2008, p. 71). As a result of this the 42 million Evangelicals in Brazil should bring this plan to completion and realise a divine national project – with the Bible as the orientation handbook. At present this view of the world is leading to a strengthening of the mutual instrumentalisation of religion and politics.

Here we have to do with a religious paradox in Brazil. Our society is going through a process of secularisation. Yet at the same time the public presence of churches is at its peak, and there are conflicts between religious groups vying for the attention of the public and the state. An example is the battle for religious leadership that took place between the Pentecostals and the Neo-Pentecostals during the election campaign. There are many religious members of parliament in the National Congress who have introduced a kind of confessional politics. In July 2014 the consecration of the Temple of Solomon of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD) by Bishop Edir Macedo was attended by the President of the Republic and ministers, governors and representatives of the Law and the armed forces.

Another way in which these groups have presented themselves in public is the March for Jesus. In 2009 President Lula legally introduced this into the official annual calendar. This march which brings millions of people together serves as a stage for conservative religious debates which preach hatred towards religions of African origin and against homosexuals.

Both examples raise the question, what Christian direction the Brazilian nation stands for: Catholic or evangelical Neo-Pentecostal? Demonstrations of power are called for. The first reaction of some churches was for them to turn away from the ecumenical movement. By withdrawing from ecumenical dialogue they wanted to strengthen their own denominational identity. A different reaction was a missionary drive to retain numbers and to win new members. The logic behind this was to develop strategies for a religious competition. Religious plurality was seen as a threat. Following this logic, theological discourse was cut back, there was less reflection and stronger emotional expression took its place. In this way the neo-pentecostal „wave“ gained strength even in so called historical and traditional churches. For example the evaluation at the last meeting of Basic Christian Communities of the Roman Catholic Church showed, the Basic Christian Communities were told “to avoid the sinister machinations of a magical therapeutic religion“. The background is that many Basic Christian Communities find themselves in the mixture of social battles, religious feelings and pragmatic expressions. Many of these groups draw attention to themselves with faith and politics – but with liturgies containing a high dose of fundamentalism (Dossie, 2014, p. 54).

Our questions to the document *Christian Witness in a multi-religious World*

The attempt to imitate the experiences of more spectacular churches was frustrating. At present the churches are considering intensely how to set themselves apart from Neo-Pentecostalism. This raises two questions: First about their own concept of mission and secondly about the meaning of missionary activity. The weakness of the prophetic witness of the Brazilian church is another point which must be discussed in this revision process. The churches, particularly those from the ecumenical movement are reflecting intensely on the relationship between faith and politics. How can we further develop this understanding in the present context of the mutual instrumentalisation of religion and politics?

With this question in mind we started to consider holding a seminar on mission and ecumenism in 2011. We originally wanted to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Vatican II with it. But in our discussion and our analysis of religious life in Brazil it became clear to us that our reflexions would have to go beyond the influence of the *Council*. In doing so we evaluated historic events of Protestant church life as well. These historic events were of central importance for our mission. Its key elements were the “option for the poor” and a Latin American process of transformation. In this context we received the document *Christian Witness in a multi-religious World* and our questions resulting from it are as follows:

- How can we read the signs of the time in which we live?
- Which directions can we follow to achieve a rejuvenation of the gospel?
- Which commitments do we have to enter into, in order to strengthen our work for peace, justice and human dignity?

Our main challenge is to recognise the changes, and to state where we stand in this complex dynamic multi-religious scenario. Globally, present-day Brazil ranks second in the sending of missionaries abroad. Some people say that Brazil is not only economically a global player but also a religious power house. The main question for us is the content of our mission and its religious expression. Currently we are experiencing tension between a strengthening of the *Missio Dei* concept and missionary activities with show elements, religious singers and a tendency to megalomania in churches that act as if they were businesses and

try to negate the others in order to better establish themselves.

In this context certain basic principles of this document are of special significance to us:

The ability to differentiate with regard to healing

In Brazil the subject of healing is being trivialised. One of the growing neo-pentecostal churches, the Igreja Mundial do Poder de Deus (World Church of God's Power) advertises with the slogan: „The hand of God is here“, suggesting with this statement that the charismatic leaders of this church have the power to work miracles. They emphasize the idea of divine healing and associate sickness with evil spirits.

Rejection of Violence

The neo-pentecostal faith is convinced that people must fight against demons. This has led to a series of attacks on African and indigenous church buildings and even to persecution of religious leaders of this tradition. There are many report reports of Brazilian Afro-American priests who were abducted and were not released until they had declared that “they accepted Jesus”.

Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Belief

With the instrumentalisation of religion for political purposes, resulting in religiously motivated persecution, it is now a subject for debate whether religious freedom has its limits when it discriminates against people with other opinions.

Respect for all people

Especially towards people belonging to indigenous and African cultures. According to the census figures from 2010 64.621 indigenous people are members of the Pentecostal church Assembleia de Deus (Assemblies of God) and there are indigenous pastors in 51 ethnic communities.

Guarantee of personal freedom

Cases of forced conversions, mainly among the African population and among homosexuals, are examples that run counter to this. Leading politicians of the neo-pentecostal movement consider homosexuality as sin and defend the practice of ‘healing’ of homosexuals. There is an increase of cases where homosexuals have been attacked for religious reasons.

Creating inter-religious relationships

This is an essential premise, in agreement with the document of Assisi (1986): „We either learn together to stand up for peace and harmony or we know nothing about each other and destroy each other and ourselves“.

Conclusions

This religious scenario brought groups together that had previously not been organised at a national level. The religious communities of African origin are an example of this. They organised themselves in order to actively work together in the public domain and condemn the persecutions, which especially affect them, through internet forums.

Another example are the marches against religious intolerance and for peace which are organised by different religious groups in order to join hands to defend against growing intolerance.

In the past the ecumenical movement was carried by secular movements which from a historical point of view had little relationship to the churches – amongst these the women's movement and the confederation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual people. There is hope that the ecumenical movement from a biblical-theological position can contribute towards contradicting the religious discourse which rejects any form of diversity.

The Benedictine Marcelo Barros, who is actively involved ecumenical und inter-religious movements, calls for people to watch out: they have to prevent the secular and pluralistic Brazil from developing into a narrow Neo-Christianity that wishes to dominate politics, not for the good of the people, but for religious interests, that are not in line with the gospel message, which is to share responsibility for setting up a more just world.

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