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## The Origins Of Brazil: A Focus on Two Religions - Judaism and *Candomblé*

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### Introduction

This paper will present insights about two particular religions, Judaism and *Candomblé*, an indigenous Brazilian religion. Despite media attention to science, religion is still alive and well and affects today's human cultures. The paper deals with the fundamental elements of Judaism and *Candomblé*, with the evolution of these religions and their influence in Brazil's formation.

Religions have two faces: internal and external. The external is the public face, the aspects exposed to the world. This paper explores the more internal faces, looking for the unique essences of each of these two religions. It will also explore the similarities and common roles played by each of these religions in building the social life and identity of different human groups.

In each of the two religions discussed, the two faces are interrelated and interact with all other practices of the society. We will explore these religions' histories, encounters, and conflicts.

All religions share the same existential role: to explain the workings of the supernatural and to provide moral codes for their respective communities. Religion is a profoundly human institution, both adjusting to changes of society and maintaining a core of eternal, unchanging belief. The two religions discussed in this paper are very different from each other, but although both are practiced by a small fraction of humanity, one of them has had universal importance. Judaism has been the core faith from which all monotheistic religions derive, and a basic element of Central Civilization (see David Wilkinson). *Candomblé* has not had such universal influence, but has played a particularly important role in Brazilian history. Judaism has also played such a role.

By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when Brazil was discovered and settled by the Portuguese, Jews counted for about 10% of Portugal's population. A large part of this Jewish-Portuguese population took part in Brazilian colonization. They came as

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newly converted Catholics, and exerted a major influence on Brazilian culture. These converts practiced Christianity, but adhered privately to their ancestral faith. The introduction of African slavery to Brazil gave rise to a number of African-type religions, one of which was Candomblé, thus becoming a meeting place of three religions—African, Christian, and Jewish.

Candomblé developed initially among the lower classes of the population, but today has found followers even in the Brazilian upper classes. We will comment on three things: the present social and political conditions promoting religious resurgence; the nature and historic world presence of Judaism, and finally, an analysis of Candomblé itself. We will look at the roles of both religions on the historic development of Brazil itself. Finally, the author will present some personal judgments about the social-political role of religion in their postmodern times.

### **Religion still flourishes**

Since the Renaissance, scientific theories conflicted with religious narratives. Geocentric theory was contradicted by astronomy's finding of heliocentrism; Darwin's theory of Evolution conflicted with belief in divine creation; germ theory replaced the belief in disease as God's punishment. Increasingly, among large sectors of the educated, religion seemed to be entering a continuous decline reaching a point of irrelevance. Science would replace religion as the basis for understanding the essence of the universe. Modernization brought with it new secular education, ethics, codes and laws—changing with changing conditions, unlike the timely codes of religion. Modernization also responded to the needs of urbanization, industrialization, and the Nation State. (See Henri Lefebvre: *The Right to the City*: equal rights for all social classes to have an access to urban services and environment.

Modernity also saw the development of social sciences included the applicability of reason to the origins of religion. One can see this in writings of Weber, Durkheim, Gramsci, Bourdieu, and Voegelin.

Religion no longer was the sole source for explaining earthly events. However, it is still a force called upon for individuals and groups in times of trouble. And in parts of the world, religion has almost as much sway as it did in antiquity. This power is understandable among the poor and uneducated, but it is even still vibrant among some of the educated in urban advanced countries, and among the young.

Why? Perhaps there is disappointment with science providing the final answer about what is real or meaningful. Perhaps Quantum Theory has influenced this mood by introducing the principle of uncertainty.

Many considerations are raised to explain this development.

Globalization and the Nation State have replaced religion, even to the local level, for carrying out most governing functions. Some religions are fighting back for control and are fighting secular globalization, which they want to replace with globalized religion (Islamism takes this position). Authoritarian religions are increasingly being joined by socio-political movements that oppose Capitalism and economic globalization, but other religions ally with politically conservative movements as well. These alliances are responsible for increasing unrest, violence, and turmoil.

Even stranger, in such Communist bastions as China, formerly persecuted Confucian ideology is now tolerated and even encouraged.

As individualism is encouraged by modern freedoms, so does loneliness grow. In Brazil, the strong growth of Pentecostal churches meets the need for companionship, offered by their religion assemblies. For many people, the return to religion represents the search for common human values. Secular and utopian ideologies have been disappointing. Along with renewed religion is a renewed interest in philosophy and exotic religions among educated populations.

### **Interactions, Syncretism and New Sects.**

A new global problem today is the ease of moving capital compared to the difficulty of moving people (migrations). The exception to this is the free movement of people (citizens) and goods within the European common market.

Despite this, people are on the move illegally from the less developed to developed countries, and they often bring with them their religions and maintenance of transnational ethnic ties. International migrations have increased the variety of religions, particularly in the West, with ideological and political consequences.

Immigration to the United States over the past two centuries has introduced Catholic and Jewish populations into a country one almost exclusively Protestant. There was certainly friction in the past, but the United States managed to integrate both into the national identity.

In Europe, the newest immigration has been Muslim, from a variety of very different countries sharing only religious identity. These migrants are benefiting from Europe's present liberalism in direct response to Europe's darker history of bigotry. Europe was once the war ground between Catholicism and Protestantism, and the long-time persecution and expulsions of Jews. Educated Europeans are going out of their way to try to be more tolerant toward Islam than they were toward religious differences in the past.

In today's cultural complexity, many people are returning to questions of their own identity rather than identifying with their nation state. A research project at Nottingham University England indicates that young people are exploring their religious and sexual identities and are in a process of negotiations, contesting, and change (Kam-Tuck Yip and others, 2010).

Not only are people returning to religious belief and practice, but new sects (often a mixture of religious ideas) are appearing in western societies. This is almost a parallel world of the "free marketplace"—in this case, religion rather than economics. In addition, in the same way that people sometimes hold more than one passport, they may also hold plural religious identities—the result of mixed religions marriages.

### **Judaism.**

The essence of Judaism is the interpretation of its sacred texts, its people's history, and the continuity of its practices. Jewish traditional behavior is based on the belief that man's role on earth is an assistant to God.

Reinterpretation of all its texts is a basic tenet of Judaism, a process carried out by prophets and since the first century AD, by learned rabbis. . This was the work of the Talmudists, of Maimonides (*Rambam*), of the Cabalists, of *Rashi*, and *Baal Shem Tov*, the founder of *Hassidism*. Judaism survived because of the continuous adjustment to new time and places. It was a portable religion.

**Jewish Identity.** The term Judaism refers simultaneously to the religion and to a cultural pattern of a unique people. The recognition of a cultural pattern permitted a continuity of identity not dependent upon membership in a nation state. This is unlike Christianity, in which identity was dual: religious and then national. In the modern world, identity with nation comes first and religion second.

Jewish identity requires only descent from a Jewish woman, not necessarily pious practice. This identity also traces Judaism back through history to the original patriarchs, or original tribal leaders (Abraham, Jacob, etc.). However, in the modern world, membership in a nation state has increasingly been the model for Jews—unless the nation-state persecutes them.

Islamic extremists still adhere to the ancient Semitic practices long abandoned by Jews: that they are a people linked and obedient to their tribal leaders. They carry that model further in hoping for a world leader, a Caliph, who will govern world Islam.

**Intimacy with God.** No intermediary is needed between the Jew and God, a point illustrated in all the holy scriptures. This was not always true—during the period of the Temple and its priesthood—all totally destroyed by the Romans. From that point

on, the only leaders were voluntarily accepted teachers, rabbis. Another aspect of that intimacy with God is the changes brought about by linearity—changes that happen over a long history. Some Asian religions are cyclical (Hinduism, Buddhism), but all of the religions derived from Judaism are linear, which has shaped the history of the Western world.

### **Candomblé.**

This religion differs greatly from Judaism. It is practiced only in one nation-state, Brazil, although it does have links with religions and cults practiced in Africa. Candomblé was a response to Brazilian colonial experience and emerged from African Yoruba religious practices brought by African slaves. The African religion did not have written scriptures, such as the Bible or the Koran, nor an integrative centralized institution. It depended upon oral transmission only, which are subject to errors and misunderstandings, as well as no dependable way to evolve (lacking written texts).

Because African cults do not have written texts, when transplanted to the West, they took on not only different names (Voodoo in Cuba, Umbanda in Brazil). In Brazil these African cults branched further: Umbanda having Christian and Jewish elements, and Macumba, focused more on magical practices. The many gods, with their relationship to particular villages, crafts or arts, resemble the ancient form of the Greek Pantheon.

Brazilian Candomblé features strong attachment to nature and its energies. Adherents of this faith are estimated to be about five million members living in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. As its practice is being adopted by members of Brazilian higher classes and educated people, there is also an increasing literature about Candomblé's ideology and history (dos Santos, 1975; Fonseca Júnior, 1983; Beniste, 1997, and others).

The increase of the number of Candomblé followers runs parallel to the growth of interests and research in Brazil about all of its historical national roots and about their human meaning. As more educated people are taking to Candomblé, there is an increase in documentation on its history and ideology. Jorge Amado, writer; Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, composers and singers; Caribé, visual artist, and other notable Brazilians joined Candomblé (Velho, 2010).

The increase of interest in Candomblé in Brazil is related to increased interest in Brazilian historic roots. Similar interest is growing in the Northeastern Brazil, where some local Christian communities, discovering their past Jewish roots, desire to return to Judaism.

Also, there is an international interest in African religions and their relationships to other religions. There are even theories about the Yoruba ancestry from ancient Jewish tribes. Recently, the London BBC announced DNA tests supporting Zimbabwe's Lemba tribe claims of Jewish roots.

There seems to be an increasing realization of the common roots of all human religions in the ancient past.

### **Judaism and Candomblé in Brazil.**

We know that Judaism and Candomblé both played an important role in Brazil's cultural formation.

**Judaism in Brazil.** By the end of the 15th century in Spain, and since 1536 in Portugal, under pressure of the Inquisition, Jews and Muslims were given the option of conversion to Christianity or expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula. Some Jews sought refuge in the Netherlands, where during the 17th century a certain amount of religious toleration was emerging.

The philosopher Baruch (Bento) Spinoza, 17<sup>th</sup> century, of Portuguese origin, fled to the Netherlands. There was certainly cause. In Portugal, those Jews who were compelled to convert were always identified as "new Christians," hence under constant surveillance for backsliding by the Inquisition. There are estimates that in Portugal, some 1,200 to 1,800 people were burned at the stake, and about 30,000 suffered other punishments.

Spain was involved in European power struggles that included religious issues. Now Spain was not only fighting backsliding Jews, but Protestant movements as well. By 1588, the Catholic Felipe II of Spain even attempted to invade the Protestant-ruled England, which has ended by the destruction of the *Invincible Armada*.

Portugal, more attached to mercantilism and to the oceanic commerce, tried not to be involved in the continental European affairs. It strengthened its political ties with England, the mercantile, and later industrial emerging power. Portugal wanted an ally in its commercial and colonial interests. The Portuguese Inquisition lost its strength earlier, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century but in Spain the Inquisition remained until 1834!

When Brazil was discovered, in 1500, thinking that it was an island, it was named as Ilha de Vera Cruz (Island of the True Cross). Later, it changed to Terra de Santa Cruz (Land of the Holy Cross). However, soon the new territory passed to be known informally as Brazil, the name given by the explorer and merchants, mostly Jews, of a wood discovered on the Brazilian coast, *Brazil wood*, used to produce a valuable reddish tincture at those times.

By the 1500's, the Portuguese Inquisition was not yet installed and Brazil was flocked to by both *new* Christians and Jews. A significant number of new Christians was even sent by the Portuguese crown to Brazil to occupy official positions. The Inquisition was kept at arms' length.

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when Dutch forces invaded Brazil and founded the city of Recife, descendants of the past expelled Jews from Iberia came to both rural and urban Brazil. Again, the Jewish presence would be part of Brazil's formation. Part of this Jewish population remained after the expulsion of the Dutch. Another part left for New Amsterdam, the future city of New York, and to the Caribbean islands when the Inquisition finally arrived in Brazil. But the remaining New Christians were among the *bandeirantes*, the organizers and leaders of the private expeditions that entered the interior of the territory and enlarged the country. They also were present in the early development of Minas Gerais region, based on the gold and diamond trade.

So, during Brazilian colonial times, its population was formed by Portuguese, *old* and *new* Christians, and Jews, guiding the new settlement. These pioneers also incorporated Indians of different tribes; African slaves brought to work in the established tropical sugar cane plantations; merchants from other European countries, entering and leaving the country periodically, many of them Jews.

Outside the areas dominated by Portuguese power remained the pre-Colombian population - Indian tribes in their villages, living in primitive communalism with no knowledge of the concept of private property.

Because there were many fewer European women than men coming to Brazil, African slaves filled the role of childbearing, leading in a short time to a majority population of mixed bloods, Mulattos. This acceptance of intermarriage and interbreeding differentiates Brazilians from all other South American populations—not in the reality of interbreeding, but the acceptance and legalization of it.

The New Christians did not organize particular institutions, nor did they encounter much of the anti-Semitism rampant in Europe. Also, among the continuous Portuguese flows of in-migration, the differentiation between Christians and New Christians was disappearing.

These distinctions declined also because of the great geographic dispersion of the population in a huge country. So many new immigrants were coming in from other countries that prejudices were difficult to maintain.

Nowadays, the presence of a rich past history of Jews and of *new* Christians in Brazil is recognized namely by the enormous number of some kinds of family names. All names derived from plants, as Oliveira [olive tree], Pereira [pear tree]; Silva, from

jungle; or by animals, such as Coelho [rabbit], and Pinto [young chicken] were common to Portuguese Jews.

In some Catholic homes in the remote Northeast, one still finds certain Jewish practices such as lightening of candles on Friday night, or people dressed in their best on Saturdays—remnants of the Jewish Sabbath.

Other indirect Jewish cultural influences in the evolution of Brazil include particularly tight family ties in public and private affairs, flexibility and willingness to negotiate, low levels of violence in its political struggles. Even Brazil's transformation from kingdom to republic was peacefully done in 1889.

Candomblé. While Christianity and Judaism were most influential among the upper classes, African faiths diffused initially among blacks, colored, and the unlettered. Because Candomblé had neither written narrative, nor integrated institutions, it was taken by the dominant social sectors as magical fetishist rituals. The maintenance of ceremonies with animal slaughters produced, among the upper classes, distaste.

They had forgotten their own eating of meat or that, at the times of Christ, animal sacrifices were a common ritual practice. Public animal slaughter is still part of some Islamic holidays.

In colonial times, these African religions were suspect, certainly because of their secrecy and the possibility that they were plotting insurrection. Today, this is not so any more. Religion, even the enthusiastic Evangelistic movement, is not very important in contemporary Brazilian politics.

## **Conclusions**

Freud stated that the human condition is the constant struggle between Eros (life giving) and Thanatos (death instinct), the basic building blocks of religion. Freud also recognized that cultural development can widen Eros and restrict Thanatos.

Such an effort requires dialog, inside a nation and between nations, an acceptance of the other and renunciation of dominance (Jullien, 2009). In the field of religions, ecumenism may express a movement of dialog in this direction and in opposition to forces of domination. It may influence other instances in this sense. Ecumenism appeared in the more developed countries where one realizes that no matter the name given to Him, the monotheist God is the same. In these countries, another differentiation gains importance, the one between believers and non-believers.

In less developed cultural environments, the name given to God is still an important issue, used by those with totalitarian religions. Ecumenism has no place in such regions, or countries.

However, with ecumenism, one faces another question in which ecumenism can become a joint religious force against laicism and promote battles between believers and non-believers (Benesch, 2010). There are battles around such questions as abortion, biological technologies, and so on. Ethics are not unique to believers; non-believers have them too. Real freedom requires that no one side *impose* its beliefs on others. Let religion be occupied in joining the movement for peace between---and inside--nations.

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