Brazil’s Broken Cross

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In the previous issue of the *Honorable Mention*, I wrote about my experiences in Brazil while on a Fulbright scholarship. It was a lengthy enough article about Brazil in general, but it did not include its spiritual life and culture. I left that subject for this article.  

In 1500 the Portuguese claimed Brazil as a Christian country. The Europeans were looking for a route across the Atlantic to India for its spices, thereby bypassing the Arabs as middlemen who were exacting high prices for them. That’s how North America was discovered, and that’s also what happened when Pedro Álvares Cabral made landfall on April 22. He thought he had discovered a large island, claimed it for Portugal, and named it Monte Pascoal or “Easter Mount” since he arrived on Easter.  

The first thing he did was have a priest celebrate mass and bless the land as a mission field for Christianity. His men erected a 23-foot wooden cross and declared on May 1 that the land would be called *Ilha de Vera Cruz* or Island of the True Cross.  

However, the settlers that followed recognized an abundance of trees that were similar to a tree in Europe used to make red dye. The tree was called *lignum brasilium* or in Portuguese, *pau-brasil*. As European sailors and merchants frequented this part of South America, they came to refer to it as the “Land of Brazilwood,” which is how the country became known as Brazil.  

Unfortunately, the fervor to possess the land for Christ soon was displaced by greed for Brazil’s resources, and instead of converting the natives, the Portuguese enslaved them. The clash between religion and materialism was a major theme in the 1986 movie *The Mission* which was set in the 1750s in Brazil. It was based on actual historical events surrounding the life and martyrdom of Paraguayan saint and Spanish Jesuit Roque González de Santa Cruz.¹  

As the movie begins, Father Gabriel is playing his oboe in the jungle to attract the Guaraní, a tribe of indigenous people who lived near the Iguazú Falls.² He is soon accepted by them as they receive him as some kindly father sent to redirect their lives for the better. His goodness is countered by the evil of slavers who have learned that the natives make more compliant and hardworking slaves than do the Africans. A slaver, Rodrigo Mendoza (played by Robert De Niro), is engaged to marry a woman who has fallen in love with his half-brother. A duel ensues, and Mendoza kills his half-brother. This death weighs so much on his conscience, that through the guidance of Father Gabriel, he repents of all of his sins and surrenders his life to the Lord. In penance, he ties a heavy bundle on his back and climbs the falls (see below).  


² Guaraní means “water.”
The weighty bundle includes his armor and sword. One of the most poignant moments in the movie is when the natives cut away the ropes, and the bundle falls away. It illustrated their forgiveness for his enslavement of their people. Mendoza sobs. Mendoza then joins Father Gabriel (played by Jeremy Irons) and Father Fielding (played by Liam Neeson) in their mission work with the Guaraní.

All is well until a Portuguese cardinal sanctions a raid on the mission so that the new converts could be sold as slaves. Ever the warrior, Mendoza trains the Indians to protect themselves, but Father Gabriel urges them not to resort to violence but to trust in God for their deliverance. They are all massacred except for a few children who escape into the forest. They tie the dead body of Mendoza to a cross and send it down the waterfalls.

The final dialogue in the movie is between the governor and the cardinal who ordered the killing and further enslavement of the indigenous people. The governor tries to justify his action with “We must work in the world; the world is thus.” The cardinal, as representative of the Roman Catholic Church, makes this reply: “No, thus have we made the world. Thus have I made it.” He does not appear very contrite though, and certainly the Roman Catholic Church did not change its position about enslavement.

I thought a great deal about this movie while I was touring the beautiful Igreja São Francisco church. As you can see from the picture below of the interior, the sanctuary is so beautiful and brilliant, it certainly bedazzles and nearly blinds. The tour guide pointed out that all of magnificent artistry and gilding were done by slaves.

By 1800, there were more than one million slaves, mostly from Africa, in Brazil. In the 1830s more than 34,000 slaves were entering the ports of Rio de Janeiro and Salvador 3

Because the Catholic Church sanctioned slavery, a famous Brazilian sculptor, Mário Cravo Junior, fashioned the bronze Cruz Caída or the Fallen Cross (see picture). Our Fulbright tour guide

called it the *Broken Cross* because of a fracture at its apex. He said that it was broken to signify the ineffectiveness of the Catholic Church to stop abortion and divorce. But most internet sources and books identify it as a monument of shame for the Roman Catholic Church’s participation in slavery.4

Erected in 1986, the *Broken Cross* inaugurated the 445th anniversary of the old *Igreja da Sé*, c. 1553, the first cathedral built in Brazil. The church was demolished in 1933. According to one guidebook, some of the cathedral’s foundations have been excavated and lie near the sculpture and are now covered by lovely wild flowers.5 The sculpture faces the port of Salvador, which is ironically named All Saints Bay. Next to Rio, it was the busiest with the importation of slaves. Most of the Africans that arrived in Bahia were taken from Sub-Saharan Africa, and the majority of them from what is now called Nigeria. One of its major African language, Yorubá, is still widely spoken in Salvador and in the masses held by several of the Roman Catholic churches.

There are churches everywhere, especially Roman Catholic. Not as obvious is the religion that is actually practiced in many of the homes and communities in the northeast part of Brazil. The religion is called Umbanda, and it is a blend of Roman Catholicism and the occult. Umbanda is a syncretic religion that combines Roman Catholicism beliefs, rituals, icons, and statuary with spiritism. Spiritists call up spirits to inhabit human bodies in order to speak knowledge from the occult or to house a reincarnated life. Psychics are ubiquitous. Umbandists cohabitate with orixás, a group of “deities” numbering about 400. Supposedly these spirits act out the manifestations of God. Practitioners also pray to the Catholic saints and nature for their intercession and divine energy. Umbanda also includes ancestor worship, called *Baba Egum*, which is an invocation of the deceased to return to the living to help their friends and families navigate through the material world. Umbandists consider themselves as conjuring white magic and distance themselves from Quimbandists who follow similar practices but will have nothing to do with Catholicism and any other religion. The Umbandist say that the Quimadists practice black magic.

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4. See [http://www.panoramio.com/photo/2578567](http://www.panoramio.com/photo/2578567) which has a much better picture than the one I took.

Against my better judgment, I went with my group of fellow Fulbrighters to a few Candomblé ceremonies. Candomblé is another syncretic religion mostly influenced by religions brought to Brazil from West Africa. Adherents believe that each person is born with one’s own personal tutelary deity. The purpose of the ceremony is through food offering, prayer, and dance of the Candomblé to communicate with one’s own orixá and allow the spirit to take control over one’s mind and body.

The first ceremony that we attended was in Salvador. We were told to sit on benches that lined the walls, to watch, and to be quiet. The ceremony started at 8 pm. As people arrived, they genuflected at an altar of statues of Umbanda spirits and their Catholic counterparts who were saints. On that same altar was a statue of Mary holding the baby Jesus.

They all wore necklaces of colored glass, crystal, or ceramic beads for spiritual protection. Each was dressed in a ritual costume with color and detail that represented their deity. The costumes were red for Oxalá, red and white for Xangô, and dark blue for Ogum.6 If one’s principal Orixá were Oxum, the goddess of vanity, the Umbandist wore a lot of gold and perfume. Oxum filled female bodies with narcissism, jealousy, and hypochondria, which characterized Oxum possessors’ personalities and day-by-day behavior. These deities that inhabited these people defined their personality, orchestrated their behavior, and controlled their destinies.

The people began to slowly dance in a circle and sang some sacred songs. I recognized the words “com Deus e a Nossa Senhora” which translates as “with God and Our Lady.” Then someone entered with an incense burner to banish harmful spirits, and then a chefê, an elderly man dressed in white who had very few teeth, led the people, I was told, in a Catholic prayer.

They started to sway and dance the samba. As time went on, they began to act like their orixá as a conjuration for the spirits to enter them. If their orixá was Oxum, they might imitate the movement of water. If Ocum, they would pretend that they were bathing under a waterfall. If Yemanjá, they would press their hands together and weave through imaginary currents.

We learned the specifics about these spirits from our Fulbright lecturers. I remember hearing about Oxumaré, a deity of the rainbow and good weather. The person who worships this god, perceives him or herself as hermaphroditic. During the Candomblé ceremony, he/she wears yellowish-green and dances like a snake because the deity is symbolized by a serpent.

The dancers that we were watching in Salvador gradually become more and more like their spirits (or were they demons?), uttering appropriate songs, screams, and moans. Their bodies jerked as if spirits had possessed them. I sat frozen, praying in the Holy Spirit for my own spiritual protection.

Some of the dancing became very erotic. As the night progressed, some of the dancers fell into paroxysms and convulsions, with their eyes falling back into their heads. We were forbidden to leave before the ceremony ended or else, trust me, I would have fled from that place. As it was, I did all that I could in way of spiritual warfare by praying in the Holy Spirit and quoting Scripture to myself.

I’m sure there were other things going on that I didn’t understand and didn’t want to understand—things about certain fruit and chicken parts and certain women with different offices that they performed. And frankly, I do not remember when and how I was finally outside and standing in front of a beautiful tree trying to breathe when our tour director came up to me and suggested that the sacred tree was talking to me. It was the absolute worst thing he could have said. If I had known how to return to our hotel on my own, I would have broken into a run and beat the bus back.
We also attended several Capoeira services in Bahia, which were similar and inclusive of Candomblé rituals and beliefs. The dancers were extremely athletic and graceful, as they performed a combination of dance and martial defense. Usually two people would oppose each other and act as warriors fighting against each other. Originally Capoeira was created by slaves to develop their bodies, the only weapons they could possess, with the hope of emancipating themselves. They disguised their martial art to look like a dance. However, the fighting game concurrently became an enactment of warfare in the spirit world in order to gain victory in the material world.

My conviction is to avoid anything that smacks of the occult like the plague. I refuse to read the Harry Potter books or see the movies. I do not open the door to kiddies in cute costumes during Halloween. I totally believe the warnings that God gives in the Old Testament like this Deuteronomy 18:10: “Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omen, engages in witchcraft, or cast spells, or who is a medium or spiritist who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord.” Therefore I don’t read fortune cookies.

Fully decked out in the “full armor of God” as described in Ephesians 6, I survived these occult services intact. My group was not as interested in attending any church services, but I was and am so glad that I did, even if I had to go to them alone.

Our tour took us to São Francisco, and as my colleagues were shopping in the streets’ markets, I was drawn by the sound of guitar music coming through a loud speaker. I recognized the tune as a Christian hymn. It was coming from a large Catholic church with its gigantic doors wide open. I wandered in and was amazed at how full it was. People were standing against the walls, but I saw an empty space in a pew and sat. A young priest was playing the guitar. Then the congregation stood up and before I knew it, we were singing in the Spirit. Right there, in this very poor place called Francisco, hundreds of us were singing in the Holy of Holies.

It was not the only time that happened. On my last night in Rio, I caught a bus to the Igreja Metodista No Jaardim Botânico. It too was very crowded, but I found a seat next to a row of college-age girls who were very friendly. As soon as they learned that I was a North American, they were anxious to try out their English.

The service began, and before we were halfway through the first hymn, the congregation was singing in the Spirit, and so was I. Suddenly men and women were on their knees in the aisles crying out to God and praising Him. The tears ran down my cheeks. I felt as though I was in heaven. Someone prophesied. I didn’t know what language it was, but I knew what was being said.

7. I kept the bulletin so I had access to the name. The church was founded in 1895. See its Website, www.imjb.org.br.
Someone else prophesied. Some people went forward to the altar and were prayed for. A few were slain in the Spirit.

I don’t know how much time passed before the pastor was preaching a sermon, and it seemed as if I could understand what he was saying. Then we sang again with words (in Portuguese) projected on a screen. The Holy Spirit fell upon us again, and I was barely aware of people going to the front, asking for healing. I was in my own space with my Jesus and it was glorious.

The people were so loving to me as I left. It had been like a visit to heaven, because I felt one with all of these people regardless of their tongue, all because of one Holy Spirit, all because of one Jesus, all because of one loving God.

I have often heard it said that the reason why the Church in the United States does not grow and why it lacks “life” compared to the Church in countries like Brazil is because our lives are so easy. I’m not sure that I totally agree with that assessment; every Christian I know has plenty of trials and tribulations to keep him/her humble and broken. However, I think it is true that our lives are very comfortable compared to those people in other countries that suffer from warfare, hunger, torture, oppression, persecution, and other forces of evil. If we were more desperate in our needs, maybe we would see a greater, more powerful move of the Holy Spirit as do the Brazilians. Also, with the powerful influence of occult religions in Brazil, one had better be a Christian warrior and know the power of the Holy Spirit.

Brazil did strike me as being extremely mystical. Father Valdelí Carvalho da Costa, a Jesuit priest, wrote his dissertation on Umbanda and was asked why Brazil’s religion tended to be so “extravagant and magical,” and he said that it reflected “the Brazilian soul.” “We live in a mythic universe,” he said, adding that the worldview grew out Brazil’s African and Indian roots, “and it’s much more fluid and all-encompassing than Catholicism…. It’s as if this mythic mentality were a parallel atmosphere we float in.”

Besides the charismata in its mainstream churches, as I evidenced in the Methodist church in Rio, the Pentecostal churches are pervasive in Brazil. Swedish missionaries brought the Assembly of God to it in 1911.

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9. The “charisma” is the charisma identified in 1 Corinthians 12:4 and refers to the spiritual gifts that are described in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts and in the instructions about the gifts in Romans 12: 6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:6-8 and 28, Ephesians 4:11, and 1 Peter 4:1. They are not to be confused with the “seven gifts of the Holy Spirit” taught by the Catechism of the Catholic Church (wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord). Nor are they the fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23. They are gifts of grace through a supernatural movement of the Holy Spirit for the building up of the Church. They include prophetic messages in unknown tongues with interpretation of tongues, prophetic messages in a known language, word of
An Italian missionary, who became a Pentecostal in the United States, founded the second largest Pentecostal church in Brazil, the Congregaçã Cristã do Brasil (The Christian Congregation of Brazil). Also from the United States came Igreja do Evangelho Quadrangular (The Foursquare Gospel Church) in the 1950s. Besides the “neo-Pentecostalism” or the “pentecostalization” or Pentecostal renewal in the historical Protestant and Catholic churches, countless movements of Pentecostalism have emerged since the 1990s, such as the Movement for Divine Healing, House of Blessing, Universal Church of the Reign of God, and International Church of the Divine Grace. They are less concerned with “moral regulations” than traditional Pentecostal churches\(^10\) and more focused on healing and expelling the occult spirits and practices. Exorcism services are very regular on Fridays.\(^11\)

As has happened frequently in America, the move of the Holy Spirit as manifestation of the gifts of the spirit has resulted in splits in churches. Now Brazil has the Renewed Baptist Church, the Renewed Presbyterian Church, etc. This, and the renewal of the Catholic Church, is considered part of the Charismatic Movement, as distinct from Pentecostalism. Pentecostals still seem to attract the Brazilian poor and expect stringent compliance with a set of morality that some other Protestants deem legalistic.\(^12\)

If there is one word that I can think of to describe Brazil’s religious culture it would be knowledge and word of wisdom that exceed the natural, discernment of spirits, and miracles of healing, raising from the dead, and exorcising demons. Christians are divided in their understanding of these gifts. The Cessationists believe that they were given only for the establishment of the first Christian church, but the others believe these gifts, the charismata, are for the benefit of all believers while on earth, and are fulfillment of the prophecies of Joel 2:28 and the promise of Christ in Mark 16:17-18.

\(^{10}\) For examples, the Church of God (Cleveland, TN) established “holiness codes” in the first decade of the twentieth century that prohibited “Coca Cola, chewing gum, rings, bracelets, and earbobs” and men from wearing neckties and attending county fairs. These codes were listed in L. Howard Juillerat’s *Book of Minutes, General Assemblies, Churches of God* (Cleveland, TN 1922), 125-27; quoted in Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 81.


\(^{12}\) Ibid., 26-28.
protean; it has a history of adaptation. Some of the oldest cathedrals in the world sit near some of the most modernistic architecture and expressions of religion. There are two cathedrals in the capital city of Brasília that are as breath-taking as some of the interiors of the city’s sixteenth-century buildings. One is the *Catedral Metropolitana Nossa Senhora Aparecida*, also known as The Crown of Thorns. The four tall statues that you see in the picture above represent the four evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

To enter, you descend stairs. The congregation sits underground, and what do you see when you look up? Angels.

Also inside is a replica of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*
Another beautiful church in Basília is *Santuário Dom Basco*, with its 80 columns that form high Gothic arches, filled in with blue and purple stained glass.

Although there is pantheism in Brazil with its “sacred trees,” there is also a Christian appreciation of nature as a witness to God’s glory. We Fulbrighters saw a field of poinsettia trees at *Fazenda Ibicaba*, one of the most famous coffee plantations in Brazil. The poinsettia has much religious significance in Brazil and not just at Christmas. Its leaves form a star that symbolizes the Star of Bethlehem, and its deep red color represents the blood of Christ.
There is one religious symbol, however, that is so closely associated with Brazil that the two are inseparable. This is Christ the Redeemer. Standing on top of Corcovado Mountain and overlooking the city of Rio, the statue stands at 98 feet, but what strikes everyone are Christ’s outstretched arms. They are 92 feet wide.

To me, this is the greatest treasure that Brazil possesses, and it is the greatest treasure it can offer the world. Whereas the Statue of Liberty that sits in the New York Harbor says, “Give me your tired, your poor / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”; in Rio is a statue of Christ that says, “Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” Jesus promised true freedom, and He is the only one who can make good that promise.

What an exhilarating end to an incredible adventure. I will always be grateful for the opportunity I had through a Fulbright to learn about this fascinating country. If you are interested in stepping out of the classroom to really learn about another country and to be used by God while in that country, talk to Professor Edna Udobong (eudobong3@liberty.edu; 434-592-5460) about Fulbright scholarships.