The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Ongoing Genocide of Black and Indigenous Peoples in Brazil

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Abstract

Cardinal Czerny has compared COVID-19 with a magnifying glass and an X-ray; this article reflects on the tragedy of the Brazilian experience with the COVID-19 pandemic and the deeper wounds it reveals and magnifies. Drawing from journalistic reports, firsthand accounts, statistics, and existing academic literature on race and racism in Brazil, this article interrogates Brazilian racialized society and how the racial divide and economic disparities have been exacerbated through the devastating impact of the pandemic upon a large parcel of the Brazilian people, focusing particularly on how the pandemic magnifies and intensifies the genocide of black and indigenous Brazilians. The article also underscores how Bolsonaro's strong man politics aggravates the situation, and scrutinizes the ambiguous role of religion in the construction and exacerbation of structural racism as well as in offering creative responses to the current situation.

Keywords COVID-19 · Brazilian Christianity · Evangelicals and politics · Structural racism · Black and indigenous genocide · The Amazon Synod

Cardinal Michael Czerny, head of the Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery for the Vatican's Comprehensive Human Development Service, recently referred to the coronavirus as "a magnifying glass that reveals the immoral social structures present in the world."¹ According to him:

COVID-19 not only intensifies the human rights violations that are already happening, but also acts as an amplifier, a magnifying glass or an x-ray that reveals the immoral social structures present in the world. This is not a surprise to those who suffer them, but it can and should open the eyes of those who are responsible for them. (Religión Digital 2020)

¹All translations are mine.

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Inspired by this quote, this article reflects on the tragedy of the Brazilian response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the past 7 months. As of today,² Brazil has surpassed 5.2 million COVID-19 confirmed cases and 153,000 deaths. These numbers put Brazil behind only the USA and India on the list of the hardest-hit countries in this pandemic, placing it in a horrendous second place when it comes to the numbers of pandemic-related deaths.³

The tragic suffering and death of many Brazilians during the pandemic should not be dismissed or accepted as inevitable. Using the playbook adopted by Donald J. Trump in the USA, Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro—a declared fan of Trump—has strategically and repeatedly diverted attention from the failures of his administration to deal with pandemic by blaming China, state governors, and his opponents for its spread and impact. Bolsonaro ran his 2018 presidential campaign explicitly mimicking Donald Trump, to the point that the media started referring to him as “the Trump of the Tropics.”⁴ Given the huge social inequality in a society where the six richest individuals own the same wealth as the 50% poorest part of a population of more than 200 million inhabitants, Bolsonaro administration's failure to take the pandemic seriously has had a drastically disproportionate impact on the most impoverished parcel of the Brazilian people, which not by coincidence are mostly black and brown.

Despite the universal character of a pandemic that threatens lives throughout the planet, the initial 7 months into the pandemic have shown that it unevenly threatens the most vulnerable social groups. In the case of Brazil, similarly to what has been documented in the USA, the pandemic has been particularly revelatory of racial injustice. The connections between the COVID-19 pandemic and endemic social injustice became clearer after the mass demonstrations protesting police violence against black Americans spread throughout the world.

On May 25, the shocking images of a Minneapolis police officer holding his knee on the neck of George Floyd for almost 9 min, and killing him on sight, shocked the world. Almost immediately, and for several consecutive weeks, thousands of people took to the streets of major US cities on a daily basis to protest racism and police violence. Similar protests were seen in London and in São Paulo, just to mention two of the many protests against racism that immediately popped up in different parts of the world. Prior to that tragic event, there were already reports in the USA drawing attention to the disproportionate way as African Americans and Hispanics were dying from the pandemic. But the death of George Floyd became the catalyst event that connected Floyd's last words—“I can't breathe”—with the

² October 17, 2020.

³ As a Brazilian writing from the USA, it is inevitable for me to note that the two countries with the largest number COVID-19 fatalities are led by politicians who have denied or minimized the danger of the virus, and whose policies sabotage scientific responses to the pandemic. While it is difficult to estimate with precision how many lives could have been saved if these governments had acted more promptly and unequivocally to contain the spread of the virus, a study done at Columbia University has shown that, in the case of the USA, if the initial locked down had been implemented just a week earlier, 36,000 lives would have been saved (Glanz and Campbell 2020). Similar estimates continue to show that a large number of lives could still be saved if masks were widely worn—something that would require national coordination and a clearer message from the highest authorities in the country. Numerous news reports have explored the politicization of the pandemic in both contexts, including the politicization of the use of masks, and how it has affected the efforts to fight the pandemic (Burdeau and Kahn 2020).

⁴ Bolsonaro's ideological guru Olavo de Carvalho is a disciple of Trump's former chief strategist Steve Bannon, who has also established a close relationship with at least one of Bolsonaro's sons, the senator Eduardo Bolsonaro. Despite his ejection from the White House, Bannon remains a behind-the-scenes right-wing important influence both in the USA and around the world (Teitelbaum 2020).

disproportionate dying of black and brown Americans from a respiratory disease. In other words, on top of a pandemic of global scale, black and brown Americans had to deal with the endemic nature of structural racism manifest in the tragic death of George Floyd, and also in the cases of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, Dion Johnson, Rayshard Brooks, and Daniel Prude, just to name a few.

The protests in the USA resonated in various other countries where crowds also marched to protest police violence against black lives and lingering racist structures that keep pressing their knees against the necks of African descendants and other minoritized ethnic groups. Brazil, in particular, was one of the places where the Black Lives Matter movement and its “I can’t breathe” cry encountered great resonance. Like the USA, Brazil has a long history of racism. Black Brazilians have been particularly aware of the violence of the Brazilian police forces, notorious for the regular use of deadly force. Jair Bolsonaro, a former army captain, sympathetic to the use of torture by the Brazilian military, was elected president in 2018, after campaigning as the anti-corruption, law and order candidate. Since his inauguration in January 2019, police killings in impoverished urban neighborhoods have soared to record numbers. That situation has worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a recent Human Rights Watch report, by May 31, 2020, while 300 of the 2 million residents of the Rio’s favelas had died of complications caused by the COVID-19, 606 had been killed by the police (Acebes 2020).

Considering the internationalization of the Black Lives Matter movement and the spread of antiracist protests around the world, in particular during a global pandemic, one can say that both the COVID-19 pandemic and the antiracist protests have contributed to increase awareness of the interconnectedness of people’s struggles for justice around the globe. The common “garment of destiny” Martin Luther King Jr. repeatedly mentioned in his speeches⁵ has become particularly palpable in the past several months. While the main focus of this essay lies on the religious responses to the pandemic in Brazil, that situation cannot be properly understood in isolation. The history of Latin American countries like Brazil, in particular, is historically entangled with the shadow of the USA upon the region since the mid-nineteenth century, which reached its peak in the second half of the twentieth century. During that period, the US foreign policy towards its Southern neighbors, guided by the privileging of American economic and political interests, repeatedly resulted in direct and indirect interferences with national governance in most Latin American countries, contributing by its turn to new waves of mass migration to the USA, a phenomenon that Juan Gonzalez (2011) has rightly called “the harvest of empire.”⁶

With an eye on these geopolitical connections, this article interrogates the devastating way the pandemic has affected the Brazilian people in the past 7 months, focusing particularly on how its impact magnifies and intensifies the continued genocide of black and indigenous Brazilians. Using journalistic reports, educational resources, church documents, and existing literature on these issues, along with information derived from virtual interactions between the author and a number of Brazilian religious leaders since March 2020, I examine religious participation in both the construction of racialized structural injustice and relevant religious responses to the current situation, some of which are contributing to alleviate suffering among vulnerable communities impacted by the pandemic.

⁵ More than half a century ago, Martin Luther King Jr. alerted us to the fact that “we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly” (King and Luther 1991).

⁶ See also Fernández-Armesto (2014).

The Ongoing Genocide of Black and Indigenous Brazilians

My core argument in this essay is that, as Cardinal Czerny reminds us, the suffering and anxieties experienced in connection with the pandemic magnify and amplify forms of injustice systemically present in the Brazilian society. These systemic or structural disparities, including the unjust accumulation of wealth by very few, are symptomatically racialized. In order to understand the asymmetric impact of the pandemic upon the Brazilian population in these first 7 months of its occurrence, it is important to clarify the nature of such asymmetries.

The racial divide in Brazil mirrors the modern/colonial world order that emerged from the violent encounter between European colonizers, the indigenous peoples of Abya Yala, and enslaved Africans in the Americas more than five hundred years ago. The new world system that emerged in connection with this colonial encounter was hierarchical, with the European elements, racially recreated as white, placed on the top of a social pyramid, in relation to whom all other people—also racialized as black, brown, or yellow—were considered by comparison inferior, less human, or lacking. The hierarchization of this new world order is at the root of modern racism, which Ramon Grosfoguel (2016) defines as “a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the human that has been politically, culturally and economically produced and reproduced for centuries by the institutions of the ‘capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world-system.’” This racialized order did not go away after the colonial era. On the contrary, it has reinvented itself in new ways and continue preying particularly on the indigenous peoples of Abya Yala and African descendants in Latin America, and more specifically in Brazil.

For decades, indigenous peoples and Afro-Brazilians have used the word genocide to describe systemic acts of racism against them.⁷ Abdias do Nascimento, a prominent black Brazilian intellectual in the twentieth century, spoke of the racism experienced by black Brazilians as a genocide (do Nascimento 1978). In his preface to Nascimento’s book *O Genocídio do Negro Brasileiro*, Florestan Fernandes

⁷ Genocide is a term that, whenever used, demands some explanation. In fact, genocide is a relatively recent word. It was coined in 1944 by a Jewish-Polish lawyer called Raphael Lemkin to describe the systematic murder of national or ethnic groups, including Jewish Europeans, in the Holocaust. In the aftermath of the World War II, the newly formed United Nations passed a resolution approving the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948). That resolution defined genocide as “acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group” (ibid.). Among those acts, the following are particularly important for the purpose of this article: (a) “Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;” and (b) “forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” (ibid.). It is worth keeping in mind, as Felipe Milanez and Samuel Vida remind us, that “the crime of genocide is not characterized by the number or quantity of people killed, nor by the express manifestation of the genocidal intent, but by the commissive or omissive way of the actions undertaken and by their objective effects. One or a few deaths produced with the interest of exterminating a group affects the whole existential dynamics of the group, directly and indirectly, damaging its autonomy, weakening its political protagonism and its strategies of cultural resistance, and contributing to the disintegration of its identities and physical disappearance.” (Milanez and Vida 2020).

Brazilian legislation typified the crime of genocide in 1956, defining it as “the conduct of ‘who, with the intention of destroying, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group’, kill, cause serious injury, submit to conditions of existence capable of causing destruction, adopting measures to prevent birth or effecting forced transfer of children” (Revista Consultor Jurídico 2020). Brazil is one of the few countries whose courts have actually applied the concept of genocide. In 1993, a Brazilian state court condemned 5 men for the massacre 12 Yanomamis in the state of Roraima, using this law. Their crimes, the court said, were committed “in connection with genocide” and included “association for genocide.” (ibid.).

endorsed the use of the word genocide, underscoring its historical manifestations. Speaking of the three centuries of slavery in Brazil, Fernandes sees a well-documented case of genocide. For him, though, one of Nascimento's most important contributions is his insistence in showing how after the abolition of slavery the genocide was intensified, threatening, in particular, the economic survival of the formerly enslaved people. Accordingly, black Brazilians were pushed to the peripheries of a class-based society, being basically excluded from the legal order. Moral and cultural extermination followed, with significant economic and demographic implications. For Fernandes, thus, genocide is not only a reference to what transpired in the past, but also to what continues to take place nowadays, under the indifference of political forces that, otherwise, have mobilized to fight other forms of genocide (*ibid.*).⁸

Similar references are found in connection with indigenous peoples throughout Latin America. In his efforts to interpret the barbarous acts committed against the indigenous peoples of Abya Yala for five centuries, D. Pedro Casaldaliga (1983) used words like crucifixion (an instrument of execution) and martyrdom to describe the horrendous acts systemically committed against them since their first encounters with the European invaders. Enrique Dussel likewise states that the exploitation of the indigenous people by the Portuguese and Spanish impacted “the basic foundations of the indigenous cosmology,” (Dussel 1981) something that can be interpreted as a cultural genocide.

Remembering that the conquest and colonization were Christian events, Guillermo Cook (1997) situated the first evangelization in connection with what he called cultural genocide. Similarly, Vitalino Similox Salazar, a K'aqchiquel Maya ecumenical leader, has referred to the conquest the “invasion of Christianity into the world of the Mayas” (Salazar 1997). In other words, both the violence of the arms and the symbolic violence of the annihilation of indigenous culture and religion were simply two complementary face of genocidal violence. William Hanks evinces that connection by identifying two levels of European subjugation of the indigenous peoples: (a) the military subjugation and (b) the *conquista pacífica* or peaceful conquest, carried on by missionaries (Hanks 2010).⁹ Both the violent and the “pacific” conquests aimed at “eradicating all vestiges of indigenous culture and religion” (Cook 1997).

Racism in the Brazilian context has always taken many forms, sometimes disguising in the form of integration, which, at the end of the day, is intended to erase difference. This was, for instance, the prevalent policy towards the indigenous peoples in Brazil during the Civil-Military dictatorship 1964–1985. The regime's effort to integrate indigenous communities into the broader Brazilian society never had the interests of the indigenous population as its goal (AEPPA 1975), favoring instead economic interests of big corporations and powerful landowners. Whereas the dictatorship ended in 1985, the systemic attack on indigenous rights, lands, and culture has only increased ever since. Such continuous attacks not only threaten the

⁸ Brazilian political forces, for instance, combated genocide when they ratified the UN Convention to Prevent and Punish Genocide in 1951. http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/Atos/decretos/1952/D30822.html. Accessed on July 26, 2020.

⁹ For a lengthier discussion of this topic, see Barreto (2017).

existence of the thousands of indigenous peoples that have persistently resisted the five-century old genocide, but life of the rain forest as well, which ends up threatening the life of the planet as a whole.

Considering the Afro-Brazilian reality, Abdias do Nascimento exposes the genocidal nature of structural racism in Brazil by examining indexes of mortality, access to education, housing, and employment conditions that demonstrate the persistence of systemic racism and its impact on the demographics of the black Brazilian population (Ramos 2019). Among other things, he identifies a “discursive effort (...) for the erasure of the black element of the Brazilian population to whiten the country,” namely the classification of “the children of interracial unions” as white (*ibid.*). According to Nascimento, fearing that the association of mestizos with blacks would lead to making the white contingent a minority, Brazilian authorities in the beginning of the twentieth century opted for associating them with whiteness, thus hiding the significance of the African presence and influence in the country (Ramos 2019). Giorgio Mortara shows how that logic works:

Those born of unions between people of brown and black color are classified as white; and through reclassification the black group loses large amount and earns very little, the brown group earns much more than they lose, and the white group wins a lot and doesn't lose anything. (do Nascimento 1978, cited by Ramos 2019)

After the end of slavery, in 1888, a large number of black Brazilians, dispossessed and abandoned to their own fate, were seen by the Brazilian elites as a problem to be dealt with, or, as Nascimento puts it, a “black stain” (do Nascimento 1978). Whitewashing was the solution they devised. Such a whitening strategy touched every aspect of Brazilian society and culture—including migration, education, religion, and demographic censuses. Its ultimate goal was to limit the flourishing of black Brazilians, and, if possible, erase their presence over the course of three or four generations (Barreto 2019).¹⁰

Nascimento dedicated his life to debunk the myth of racial democracy, which, in contrast with this whitewashed reality, portrayed Brazilian society as welcoming and affirming of racial difference. Such a myth was constructed with the help of intellectuals such as sociologist Gilberto Freyre (1946), who developed a theory of miscegenation which idealized the encounter between European, African, and Indigenous peoples and the mixing of the three races in the Brazilian context, dismissing the inherent violence of colonization.¹¹ Freyre's theory did not take the indigenous and African genocide fully into account nor it explored all its consequences. The myth of racial democracy created an aura of racial harmony that, by contrast, masked the systemic reality of white supremacy and its deadly and enduring impact.

¹⁰ For a more thorough discussion of structural racism, see de Almeida (2018).

¹¹ This book first appeared in Portuguese in 1933. For a discussion of the problems with Freyre's views of *mestizaje*, see Silva and Paixão (2014). For an account on how Freyre's encounters with Protestantism in Recife and at Baylor University impacted his views on race in Brazil, see Siepierski (2002).

Genocide in the COVID-19 Era

Health professionals and social movements have repeatedly used the term genocide in reference to the Bolsonaro administration's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹² What seems to be missing in those conversations is the connection between Bolsonaro's responses to the pandemic and the ongoing genocide described above. Because of his authoritarianism, his indifference to the suffering of others, his often disrespectful style, particularly directed towards women, the LGBTQ+ community, *Nordestinos*, *Quilombolas*, and Indigenous Brazilians, and his overtly defense of torture and lobbying of violence, Bolsonaro is commonly singled out as the perpetrator of a genocide. But Bolsonaro and his administration can only be linked to the genocide of black Brazilians (I follow here Nascimento's use of black in a broader sense, as a reference to all people of African descent) and indigenous peoples if his actions and policies reinforce structural racism, the basis of the genocide of black and indigenous Brazilians.

To proceed in that direction, I submit that Bolsonaro's personal acts and words, along with the policies of his administration (especially its response to the pandemic), magnify and intensify already existing genocidal politics of death repeatedly aimed at the black and indigenous Brazilian population.¹³ The Bolsonaro administration's policies and its dismissive attitude towards the pandemic have contributed to the multiplication of preventable COVID-19-related deaths, which disproportionately affect black and indigenous Brazilians. On top of being the ones dying the most, black Brazilians are also the majority of those losing their jobs and experiencing hunger during the pandemic.

The dynamics of racism in Brazil tend to be deceitful. When compared to the racial experiment in the USA, Brazil developed an assimilationist doctrine of white superiority based not on blood purity, but on phenotype (Skidmore 1992).¹⁴ Perhaps, nothing illustrates this racial doctrine better than Modesto Brocos y Gómez's 1895 infamous painting *The Redemption of Ham*.¹⁵ The painting shows a black woman, who stands with her hands elevated, as if she was grateful for the scene she sees.¹⁶ Sitting in front of her is a "mulher parda," a woman of mixed race. On her lap, the painting shows a white baby. On the far left is a white man dressed as a European immigrant, presumably the father of the white baby. Absent from the picture is the white Portuguese man who is presumed to be the father of the mestiza young woman with the white baby on her lap. By privileging miscegenation, Brazilian elites developed a racial doctrine aimed at eliminating blackness "peacefully."

¹² In fact, on July 26, 2020, President Jair Bolsonaro was denounced by UNISaúde, a coalition of entities representing more than one million health workers in Brazil, at the International Criminal Court for crime against humanity and genocide, because of his insensitive and irresponsible response to the pandemic. <https://pendect.com/categories/politics/american/brazil/jair-bolsonaro-is-denounced-in-the-hague-for-genocide-and-crimes-against-humanity>. Accessed on July 26, 2020.

¹³ Another way to talk about this politics of death is to use the term necropolitics, coined by Achille Mbembe (2019) and used in connection with structural racism in Brazil by de Almeida (2018). For the use of this term in connection with Brazilian religion, see Pieper and Mendes (2020).

¹⁴ For more on this, see the concept of "pigmentocracy" in Telles (2014).

¹⁵ The painting can be seen here: <https://useum.org/artwork/Ham-s-Redemption-Modesto-Brocos>

¹⁶ Branqueamento or whitening is often associated with ideas of racial improvement—commonly expressed in phrases such as "melhorar a raça."

However, no form of racism can ever be peaceful. Black Brazilians have always experienced discrimination and violence on many levels, beginning with the situation of economic dispossession and other social scars lingering from the long shadow of slavery. In contrast to the separate but equal racial doctrine in the USA, Graziella Silva and Marcelo Paixão state that the Brazilian racial doctrine should be described as mixed and unequal (Silva and Paixão 2014). Such inequality is especially noticeable in the drastic socioeconomic disparities between the black and white populations in the country (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística—IBGE 2019). The line of poverty in Brazil is for the most part a color line. Black and brown Brazilians form the majority of the poor, those at the receiving end of structural violence.

According to the IBGE, black and brown Brazilians constitute the majority of the working class in the country. In 2018, this contingent corresponded to 57.7 million people, 25.2% more than the number of white Brazilians in the workforce. In tandem, black and brown Brazilians are substantially more represented among the unemployed and in the “informal sector,” i.e., those in precarious job conditions. They constitute two-thirds of all unemployed. Confirming the centrality of the racial criterion in such discrimination, the report shows that “the relative disadvantage of this populational group remains even when one considers the cut by level of education” (IBGE 2019).

From being the largest victims of child mortality to the most common target of police brutality to making up to 62% of all incarcerated population nationwide (Barreto 2019), the impact of structural racism upon the lives of black Brazilians has been devastating. That is why Abdias do Nascimento and the *Movimento Negro Unificado* he helped organize in 1978 challenged the place and role assigned to Brazilians of mixed race:

[D]espite any social status advantage such as [being an] ethnic bridge intended for the salvation of the Aryan race, the position of the mulatto is essentially equivalent to that of the black: both victims of equal contempt, identical prejudice and discrimination, surrounded by the same disdain from an institutionally white Brazilian society (do Nascimento 1978).

Nascimento was not interested in protecting any particular trench. His goal was to dismantle the entire racialized order and re-envision a new Brazilian society. Thus, the importance of reclaiming those he calls mulattoes as constituents of the black majority that forms the Brazilian society. As discussed earlier, heretofore, racial demographics had been used to obscure blackness and perpetrate the genocide of black Brazilians. Nascimento inverted the situation by reclaiming the blackness of those being whitewashed.

Taking that move further, he tackled another face of structural racism: cultural assimilation. He knew that whitening does not take place only through racial miscegenation or the manipulation of science and demographics.

Cultural assimilation is so effective that the cultural African heritage exists in a state of permanent confrontation with the dominant system, designed precisely to deny its foundations and to destroy or degrade its structures. (ibid.)

The systemic genocide of black and indigenous populations in Brazil has been effected through mechanisms of cultural whitening that reinforce the assimilationist notion of white superiority. Part of that process takes place through education. That is why Nascimento criticizes the exclusion of black Brazilians from the “universality of the university” (ibid.).

A third level on which the mechanisms of cultural assimilation operate is the religious realm. Whereas the preservation of African spirituality became a crucial element of survival and resistance for the Africans and African descendants in the Americas, the violence perpetrated against them began with the baptism of enslaved Africans, which took place either in the ports of Africa or in the Brazilian ports upon arrival (ibid.). Christianity has played a central role in the efforts to suppress African traditional religions. The evangelization of enslaved Africans, regardless of whether done by coercion or by persuasion, as we have discussed earlier, was, therefore, a violent event.

Nascimento challenged the common notion of Catholic agency in the process of syncretism, stating that the Catholic Church was not responsible for the persistence of the African spirituality in Brazil. Its ultimate goal was to suppress the African spiritual heritage, which persisted only due to the resilience of the oppressed. That heritage persisted not only through the formation of African-derived religions but also through other cultural expressions, such as popular religiosity and festivities. He highlights, however, that, on the part of the Church, the norm was the rejection of Afro-Brazilian religions. Those practices were commonly suppressed and occasionally investigated by the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition. In spite of that, some forms of syncretism involving Catholic- and African-derived elements found its way among enslaved and freed Africans.

What bothers Nascimento is the false notion of a syncretism promoted by the Church. For him, real syncretism can only happen when there is full recognition and respect of the religions involved. That is what took place, for instance, among the diverse African traditions and between those and indigenous spiritual traditions. In both cases, the elements of both traditions were acknowledged and preserved (do Nascimento 1978). And if there were cases in which African-derived religions syncretized with European elements (in Candomblé or Umbanda, for example), both the European and the distinctly African and indigenous elements were preserved. The mere incorporation of African elements by Brazilian Catholicism, though, does not deserve, according to Nascimento, to be called syncretism. It should rather be seen as a manipulative strategy of assimilation effected by “the rationalizing fertility of Brazilian racism.” For Nascimento, this is nothing but the misappropriation of African culture (ibid.).

Nascimento does not treat the case of Protestant Christianity in his book. But the attitude towards Afro-Brazilian religious practices among Protestants is not less problematic than the cultural discrimination (and in some cases misappropriation) he accuses the Catholic Church of. Most Protestant churches founded in Brazil in the nineteenth century originated either from European immigration or from North American missionary efforts. The majority of the missionaries that founded those churches came from the Southern US states that fought to keep the right to own slaves. The ecclesiastical institutions they founded in Brazil reproduced the distorted and racialized notion that Afro-Brazilian religions were inferior and superstitious. Many of the agents

of the North American migration to Brazil that became the bedrock of subsequent US Protestant missions were Confederates. In the US, they provided doctrinal basis to justify slavery, including a reading of the Ham curse in the book of Genesis from which the perverse idea that blackness was the result of a curse was derived. Thousands of them saw in Brazil “the promised land where Confederates defeated in the Civil War could rebuild their lives, their homes and their properties including slave labor” (da Silva 2011).

Christian discrimination against Afro-Brazilian religious practices and traditions received state support. Although the Brazilian republic formed in 1889 affirmed the separation of church and state, the first Penal Code of the Republic, passed a year later, still criminalized practices associated with Afro-Brazilian religions. Until 1976, Candomblé houses had to apply for police permission to celebrate public ceremonies (Serra 2018). The Afro-Brazilian religious right to freely worship only got legal protection under the 1988 Constitution.

Such protection, though, has not stopped religious prejudice against Afro-Brazilian religions neither has it prevented the vandalization of their monuments and places of worship (dos Santos et al. 2017). On July 15, 2020, for example, the bust of Mãe Gilda de Ogum, a respected Candomblé *Iyalorixá*, was vandalized in Salvador, a city where almost 80% of the population identify as black or *pardo* (of mixed-races). The man who attacked the monument said that God commanded him to do so. This was not the first act of vandalism against that monument. A similarly malicious act took place in May of 2016.

Mãe Gilda is a symbol of the fight against religious intolerance in Brazil. A beloved Candomblé *Iyalorixá*, she got ill and died after being victim of two separate acts of religious intolerance and aggression enacted by Pentecostals. In 2007, President Lula da Silva sanctioned January 21, the day of her death, as the National Day to Combat Religious Intolerance.¹⁷ Her case is representative of thousands of other stories of religious intolerance practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions have suffered in the hands of Christians—a good number of them Evangelicals—in the past few decades. A report prepared by several organizations in the city of Rio de Janeiro describes 697 cases of violation of religious rights or religious discrimination, most of which targeting members of Afro-Brazilian religions, registered by the police between 2011 and 2015 (dos Santos et al. 2017). Numerous other cases such as these are never reported.¹⁸

The Intensification of Black and Indigenous Suffering Under Bolsonaro

Although the crucifixion of black and indigenous Brazilians is not new, the current economic, political, and sanitary conditions in Brazil have intensified their suffering,

¹⁷ For more information on this story, see “Mãe Gilda, a Symbol of the Fight against Religious Intolerance, to be Honored with a Bust,” <https://blackwomenofbrazil.co/mae-gilda-a-symbol-of-the-fight-against-religious/>. Accessed on Aug. 4, 2020.

¹⁸ A recent phenomenon in the peripheral neighborhoods in large metropolises like Rio de Janeiro is the rise of Evangelical cartel bosses who, among other things, are repressing Afro-Brazilian religions in the areas they control. In contexts like that, people will rarely report any aggression to the police for fear of retaliation. For more on this topic, see Vital (2015). It is worth keeping in mind that indigenous traditions and Islam are also among the most targeted by religious hatred and intolerance. A recent story about the growth of Islamophobia in Brazil under Bolsonaro appeared in *Sojourners* (Garcia 2019).

along that of other oppressed communities—particularly women of color and LGBTQ+. Structural racism, religious intolerance, misogyny, LGBTQphobia, and an inexplicable hate for the poor have been part of the history of Brazil since its inception. But perhaps, Brazil has never had a president so entrenched in hate speech as Jair Bolsonaro. While Bolsonaro did not give birth to the highly racialized state of Brazilian society, he is undoubtedly one of its clearest incarnations. On top of his inflammatory rhetoric, he legitimizes white supremacy and racial discrimination through the policies his administration is advancing. White supremacists who encapsulate their racialized morality in discourses to defend family, God, and nation have existed in Brazil at least since the 1920s. But for a long time, they have not felt their voices so empowered and amplified in the public arena as they do since the election of Jair Bolsonaro.

Bolsonaro is a former army captain forced to retire in 1986 due to an act of insubordination. He served in the lower house of the Brazilian Congress between 1991 and 2018, switching parties many times during that period. His long tenure in the Brazilian congress is not remembered by any specific law he promoted or passed. Bolsonaro is known basically for a rhetoric filled with racist, LGBTQ-phobic, and misogynic attacks against his opponents, along with his outrageous defense of torture and torturers.¹⁹

Bolsonaro's words are accompanied by acts and policies, which are equally or more dangerous because they objectively effect death. This has been, for instance, the case with his expansion of the “the *excludente de ilicitude*, an article in Brazilian law that permits impunity for some acts generally considered illegal” (Jenner 2020). By expanding the reach of this article, formerly applied only for killing in self-defense, Bolsonaro has increased impunity in a police which is already violent, kills excessively, and, above all, kills mostly young black men. Not surprisingly, killings by the police have significantly increased since he took power.

Likewise, during his election campaign, Bolsonaro promised to arm the Brazilian population. Since he became president, through the use of executive orders, he has relaxed laws restricting gun ownership, making it more difficult to trace weapons and ammunitions down:

The measures adopted increase the population's access to weapons and ammunition and, on the other hand, weaken the control and inspection mechanisms for war articles. One of them, passed by the Ministry of Defense, repealed three rules that improved the tracking of weapons and ammunition in the country. (Amazonas Atual 2020)

This significant rise in the selling of weapons is taking place during the unprecedented public health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, when the country and its population have been also economically strained. Armed attacks against indigenous lands in the Amazon rainforest and in the Midwest wetlands have spiked since Bolsonaro took office and continue to take place during the pandemic.²⁰ As Brazilian Indigenous activist Sonia B. Guajajara states:

¹⁹ Bolsonaro defends that torture should be legitimately used by the police against criminals or against communists.

²⁰ Sam Cowie (2019) documents how Bolsonaro moved from praising the genocide of Indigenous peoples to emboldening attacks against Indigenous communities.

The pandemic is added to other historical problems, which we already face, such as deforestation, fires, violence, internal conflicts, and the very Brazilian political situation that at the moment does not contribute to the protection of rights. On the contrary, we are at the moment of a very tyrant government, which removes rights, incites violence, fuels a hate campaign, and all that was already very latent. The pandemic adds to all of that. And we are unable to have the time or the right to fight and control the coronavirus, because we are also dedicated to all these other situations (Guajajara 2020).

The year of 2020 has seen more wildfires in reservation areas than previous years. According to data from the Greenpeace, in July of 2020, “hot spot alerts in these areas increased by 76.72% compared to the same month in 2019.” Furthermore, “in the region that concentrates more than 98% of the country’s Indigenous Lands, the number of these episodes rose from 305 to 539” (Rocha 2020). As Dom Roque Pasloschi, archbishop of Porto Velho, has noted, the quarantine does not have the same impact on those practicing illegal actions in the Amazon; “On the contrary, they take advantage of the lack of inspection and political and administrative management in the country to continue with illicit actions on indigenous lands.” (Santos 2020).

The fact that indigenous peoples and Afro-Brazilians are forced to deal with problems like systemic violence on a daily basis, and that there has been an intensification of those problems during the pandemic, necessarily places those sectors of the Brazilian population in great disadvantage to deal with the direct impact of the virus itself. Thus, the impact of the virus upon these communities has been the most devastating.

As the data on the number of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths began to become available in the first months of the pandemic, it became increasingly clear that the virus has affected black and brown Brazilians in particularly harmful ways. São Paulo, Brazil’s largest city, has also been by far the place where COVID-19 has killed the largest amount of Brazilians so far. According to a report by Rede Nossa São Paulo, the neighborhoods with the highest proportions of people identified as black and brown accumulate the highest number of deaths from COVID-19. A similar correlation is made in relation to housing: neighborhoods with more slums tend to have more cases and deaths (Tajra 2020).

This report combines the information from the recent COVID-19 data provided by São Paulo’s city hall with the “Map of Inequality” produced by Rede Nossa São Paulo in 2019. The *Mapa da Desigualdade* makes a clear correlation between race and low income. The correlation between COVID-19’s “preference” for black and brown lives reinforces the impact of social and economic inequality on public health. This is one of the instances in which the virus reveals and intensifies already existing racialized structures of injustice. Populations whose “necks” have been already under the institutional kneel of racism and forced impoverishment are in much greater danger of dying during the pandemic, while having the least resources to deal with it. A recent study promoted by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE) has shown that black women are the most vulnerable group to the pandemic. Women and black Brazilians are both the most affected and the greatest number of fatal victims of COVID-19 (Soares 2020).²¹

²¹ According to Soares (2020), “For every ten people who report more than one symptom of the disease, seven are black or brown - a portion of the population heavily dependent on informality.”

In short, some social groups are particularly exposed to the pandemic simply because they have a particular vulnerability, which precedes the quarantine and worsens with it. Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls these groups “the South,” a term that “does not designate a geographical space,” but instead “a political, social and cultural space-time” (Sousa Santos 2020). According to Sousa Santos (2020), these groups include (1) women, who have also had to deal with increased domestic violence during the pandemic; (2) informal workers, who even prior to the pandemic worked in a very precarious condition, and who have seen renewed attacks on their rights during the pandemic²²; street workers, also part of the informal sector; homeless people, or those living on the streets; those living in *favelas* or slums, many of which have already experienced a permanent quarantine from their right to the city, being contained in their by the force of the police; refugees and IDPs (particularly those living in camps); people with disabilities; and the elderly. He stops short, though, of naming the particular vulnerability of the indigenous peoples, and of underscoring that many of the people living in what Fanon (1967) calls “the line of the human” are people of color.²³

Religious Moral Responses to the Crisis

Religion has been a key component in both the health and economic crises Brazil is facing and the varied responses offered to the pandemic. As I explained in the previous section, one of the multiple faces of structural racism is religious. The dismissal of Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous religions as “superstitious” or as the cause of economic backwardness and the demonization of those same religions are expressions of racism. The religious face of racism is often manifested in the form of religious intolerance, rights violations, and even physical violence. Acts of religious intolerance have continued to take place in Brazil during the pandemic. In some cases, certain Brazilian Christians have used the pandemic to disseminate what they believe to be an ongoing spiritual warfare.

In the beginning of the pandemic, for example, Edir Macedo, the 75-year-old head of the powerful *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (IURD), initially denied the veracity of the pandemic. Then, he attributed it to Satan, refusing to suspend the church services. At that time, he contrasted the threat of the coronavirus with what he called “corona-faith.” In his words, “whoever has faith in God is protected” (Maciel et al. 2020). In June, though, he contracted COVID-19 and was hospitalized. He initially tried to hide the information about his hospitalization, using a different name at the hospital, but the media found it out. When he left the hospital, he said that he used hydroxychloroquine in his treatment and that the drug cured him. Silas Malafaia, the head pastor of *Assembleia de Deus Vitória em Cristo* and a religious advisor to Bolsonaro, also downplayed the seriousness of the pandemic, and lobbied to keep his church open during the pandemic (Rubin and Ndyaie 2020). Along with other national Evangelical

²² In Latin America, 50% of all workers are in the informal sector (Sousa Santos 2020).

²³ According Grosfoguel (2016) depending on different colonial histories, “the hierarchy of superiority/inferiority along the lines of the human can be constructed through diverse racial markers.” Racism, having multiple expressions, “can be marked by color, ethnicity, language, culture and/or religion.”

leaders, Malafaia supported Bolsonaro's call for a national day of fasting on April 5, a public spectacle that included tens of thousands of believers kneeling on the streets to fight "the plague." The national convocation was addressed to "God's army," functioning as a call to battle, a spiritual warfare. The denialist instance underlying this fasting campaign perfectly played in the hands of a populist leader who has consistently acted—with the help of his cabinet and followers—to spread dangerous misinformation about COVID-19, including the promotion of false cures and risky behavior (Ricard and Medeiros 2020). One of the victims of COVID-19 has been democracy. A recent editorial on *The Economist* has rightly stated that the pandemic has eroded democracy, and strongmen have taken advantage of it.²⁴

Bolsonaro is one of them. Evangelical and conservative Catholic clergy and politicians are among his main supporters. The religious leaders supporting Bolsonaro's denialist instance are not simply being passively used by the populist president. Several of them, like Malafaia himself, serve as Bolsonaro's spiritual counselors, and many times are the ones propagating conspiracy theories which confuse and polarize a misinformed and desperate nation. They not only corroborate government attitudes that contribute to make Brazil the country with the second highest number of confirmed COVID-19 deaths in the world, but they themselves actively promote anti-scientific biases and risky behaviors. For them, this is a battle between belief and unbelief, and God is on their side.

Some of these leaders operate a network of misinformation on social media. Among other things, they have elevated Bolsonaro to a messianic stature. They describe him as having been chosen by God to lead Brazil and to protect Christian belief—even though there is no evidence to back the affirmation that Christianity is under attack. For many members of their churches, any information from the mainstream media or shared by state Governors that contradicts the President is perceived as an attack against him and quickly dismissed (Marton 2020).²⁵

This kind of almost unconditional support of Bolsonaro can be found not only among Pentecostals, but also among other evangelicals, including Baptists and Presbyterians who have been awarded appointments to positions of power in his administration. As Fabio Py (2020) reminds us, Damaraes Alves, the head of Bolsonaro's Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights, is a pastor of *Igreja Batista da Lagoinha*. Benedito Guimaraes Aguiar Neto, appointed as President of the CAPES (*Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior*) foundation, the most important funding agency for scholars' development in the country, is a Presbyterian pastor. Likewise, the new Minister of Justice, André Luís Mendonça, and the Minister of Education, Milton Ribeiro, are both pastors linked to the most conservative stream of Brazilian Presbyterianism. Valsenir Braga, a Baptist pastor, is Bolsonaro's appointee to the Conselho Nacional de Educação (CNE). These are only a few of many Evangelicals involved in what Py has called "the death management" of

²⁴ See the editorial "The pandemic has eroded democracy and respect for human rights," https://www.economist.com/international/2020/10/17/the-pandemic-has-eroded-democracy-and-respect-for-human-rights?fsrc=newsletter&utm_campaign=the-economist-today&utm_medium=newsletter&utm_source=salesforce-marketing-cloud&utm_term=2020-10-16&utm_content=article-link-1&etear=nl_today_1. Accessed on October 17, 2020.

²⁵ This is one of the similarities with the situation in the USA, where many Evangelicals also adopt analogous attitudes in relation to Trump.

this administration (Py 2020). Such a support is not a coincidence. As Magali Cunha underscores, Bolsonaro has skillfully promoted an agenda that strongly appeals to “the conservative evangelical imagery, which prioritizes the protection of the traditional family, heteronormativity and control of women’s bodies” (Fachin 2019). According to Cunha, Bolsonaro fulfills the dreams of many Evangelicals who have for years aspired to have someone in the country’s highest office to defend their moral agenda. Such agenda is not only Evangelical or Pentecostal, though. Conservative sectors of the Catholic Church—the *Opus Dei*, in particular—too have thrown their support behind the President for similar reasons.

This relationship between Bolsonaro and his conservative Christian base is not one-sided and cannot be reduced to political manipulation on his part. Bolsonaro’s religious supporters are rational beings who make choices based on values they identify with. Furthermore, as Felipe dos Anjos and Joao Luiz Moura rightly underscore, although the religious actors may have changed, the Christian structure supporting the moral views of the Brazilian state has remained almost intact.

The evangelical base of support of bolsonarism and Bolsonaro’s investments on this base cannot be simply explained by [the idea of] electoral capitalization or by the ideological argument of a lower-clergy populism. On the contrary, among them there is a common or reciprocal theological-political project, which shares the same catastrophic worldviews and the same paranoid and repressive logic of life, corporealities, desires, political expressions and cultural diversity of the Brazilian population. The Brazilian state has always been Christian. It did not become evangelical and me *bolsonarista* by coincidence or accident (dos Anjos and Moura 2020).

Although Bolsonaro enjoys a broad support among his conservative Christian base, not all Christians have supported him or his policies. The National Council of Churches (CONIC), composed by the Alliance of Baptists of Brazil, the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Anglican Church of Brazil, the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil, the United Presbyterian Church, and the Syrian Antioch Orthodox Church, for instance, has been a consistent prophetic voice resisting and denouncing the politics of death advanced during the pandemic. On August 8, 2020, when Brazil reached unbelievable 100,000 deaths caused by the pandemic, CONIC, along with several other ecumenical bodies such as Religions for Peace, Paz e Esperança Brasil, and the *Instituto de Estudos da Religião* (ISER), published an open letter and held a public act via Facebook to mourn the COVID-19 victims and offer prayers, comfort, and hope to the thousands of families that have lost dear ones and who are facing the economic outcome of the health crisis.²⁶ Various ecumenical organizations have ceaselessly worked during this period to educate the population, denounce misinformation and fake news, and protest the abuses of power and violations of human rights against the most vulnerable. Among other things, they have often denounced the demonization of Afro-Brazilian religions, including invasions and depredation of ritual

²⁶ <https://www.conic.org.br/portal/noticias/3616-organizacoes-religiosas-lancam-ato-de-luto-pelas-100-mil-vitimas-de-covid-19>.

symbols and worship spaces of Afro-Brazilian religions as well as “the rhetoric that fosters prejudice and discrimination” (Santos 2020).

Likewise, on July 30th, 152 Catholic Bishops published a sweeping critique of the government’s lethargy before the severe crisis facing the country, in a “Letter to the People of God,”²⁷ which, “in defense of the little ones, justice and peace,” called for “objective proposals and pacts with a view to overcoming the great challenges, in favor of life, especially of the most vulnerable and excluded segments, of this structurally unequal, unjust and violent society.” Brazil has a significant history of Catholic and ecumenical action in solidarity with the oppressed, which can be traced back to some incipient movements in the 1950s.

Organizations such as CIMI (Conselho Indigenista Missionário), a Catholic organism linked to the CNBB (Conferencia Nacional de Bispos do Brasil), which has for decades stood in solidarity with the indigenous peoples, have joined indigenous organizations working to educate the indigenous populations about the COVID-19 pandemic, warn non-indigenous neighbors about behaviors that may contribute to bring the disease into indigenous lands, and denounce invasions and fires taking place in the Amazon rainforest during the pandemic. Among other things, they have underscored that “viruses and diseases of this type have caused the genocide of entire peoples and have contributed, as part of a history of forced contacts, wars and exterminations, to reduce the indigenous population in Brazil over the centuries” (CIMI 2020).²⁸ Numerous other ecumenical and denominational organisms have played important roles by taking advocacy, educational, and financial initiatives in support of vulnerable communities throughout Brazil.

A recent report shows, for instance, how the basic ecclesial communities (CEBs) have stepped up to help the victims of the collapse of healthcare systems in several Latin American countries during the pandemic (Lima 2020). The COVID-19 outbreak began right after the 11th continental meeting of the CEBs, in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Despite its numerical decline in the past three decades, the CEBs still maintain a well-structured network that has proved helpful during the pandemic. According to Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff, in their efforts to fight the coronavirus and protect the poor, the CEBs are “very well-organized and can make contacts, provide information and alert the people on precautionary measures.” In countries like Mexico, “the CEBs network has been functioning as a dependable system of mutual aid, organizing food distribution and facilitating access to assistance coming from the state” (ibid.).

A number of Brazilian churches of different denominations moved their services to online platforms back in March, and in the process found new ways to offer pastoral support to their communities. Some of them have joined interreligious local forums to respond to critical needs. Interfaith collaboration has also functioned as a counterpart to the repeated attacks against Afro-Brazilian religions I mentioned earlier. In 2018, for

²⁷ The letter, published under the names of its 153 signers, can be found on different webpages, including that of the CENDHEC (Centro Dom Helder Câmara de Estudos e Ação Social, <https://www.cendhec.org.br/single-post/2020/07/30/Carta-ao-Povo-de-Deus>).

²⁸ While I was wrapping this article up, I read about the passing of Dom Padre Casaldaliga, Bishop Emeritus of the Prelature of São Félix do Araguaia. For many decades, D. Casaldaliga was one of the most vocal defenders of the rights of indigenous peoples in Brazil. He helped found both CIMI (the Indigenous Missionary Council) and CPT (the Pastoral Land Commission), another key organism that advances the rights of indigenous peoples and landless workers in the country.

instance, the city of Rio de Janeiro's Council of Christian Churches "ran a fundraising campaign to help rebuild the *terreiro* of Mãe Conceição de Lissá, which had been burned down in Duque de Caxias" allegedly by Evangelical individuals (Dip 2018).

On top of forming networks of collaboration with other churches, religious communities, and civil society organizations, some congregations in poorer areas of Brazil are creatively providing local responses to the calamity their communities are facing during the pandemic. Among other things, they have provided basic assistance to church members who are unemployed or have been economically affected by the pandemic, offered guidelines for the needy to apply for public aid, developed social projects to help those without a home to have access to proper sanitation and food, shared reliable information, while trying to dispel misinformation, offered virtual pastoral care to youth, women, and elderly members, and provided mental and physical health care in partnership with health professionals.²⁹ The same kind of supportive solidarity is taking place in the Amazon region among indigenous peoples living in a permanent situation of food vulnerability (Santos 2020). Such situation, exacerbated by the pandemic, has been a chronicle problem for the indigenous peoples in the Amazon, which calls for a radical change of mentality on the part of state and church in Brazil. The Catholic Bishops of the Brazilian Amazon, alarmed by the high vulnerability of the indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities in the region, have demanded that all necessary measures be taken to protect those communities, including the testing and proper isolation of these communities, and the strengthening of inspection measures "against deforestation and mining."

The bishops have also tried to ensure "participation of civil society, social movements and representatives of traditional populations in spaces of political deliberations." Most importantly, they have affirmed that their clamor to "stop predatory activities and, at the same time, invest efforts in alternatives to the failed proposal for progress and development that destroy the Amazon and threaten the lives of its peoples" can only happen through a careful process of listening to the Amazon peoples, in particular, and, more generally, to "the cries of the poor and the Earth" (Comissão Episcopal para a Amazônia 2020).

The Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region was held in October of 2019 to assess the relationship between the Church and the peoples of the Amazon, and call for a new path of evangelization in the region. The synod's final document called for "an integral conversion," which makes listening to the cry of the poor and the cry of earth the starting point of a new pastoral journey:

Our pastoral conversion will be Samaritan, in dialogue, accompanying people with the real faces of indigenous people, peasants, afro-descendants and migrants, young people, city dwellers. All of this requires a spirituality of listening and proclamation. This is how we will walk and navigate in this chapter (Amazon Synod 2020).

²⁹ All the examples of local initiatives cited here come from information provided by pastors of the Alliance of Baptists of Brazil which the author has had virtual access to since March.

By describing such a pastoral conversion as Samaritan, the bishops affirmed that priority must be given to meeting “everyone, especially the indigenous peoples, the poor, those excluded from society and those who are different.” The immersion into:

the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious reality of the Amazon demands an open attitude of dialogue, fully recognizing the multiplicity of interlocutors: the indigenous peoples, the river dwellers, peasants and afro-descendants, the other Christian Churches and religious denominations, organizations of civil society, popular social movements, the State, finally all people of good will who try to defend life, the integrity of creation, peace and the common good.

Pope Francis responded to the synod through the Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia* (2020). Both the synod and Pope Francis’ response to it acknowledged the colonial roots of the devastation of the Amazon environmental system and its peoples, calling for a radical change in attitude and for true openness to interreligious and intercultural dialogue, one that fully recognizes all subjects, especially the indigenous peoples, the river dwellers, peasants, and afro-descendants. Pope Francis also reminds his readers that colonization has not ended. Despite being changed, disguised, and concealed in many places, its contempt for the life of the poor and the fragility of the environment persists (Francis 2020).

In response to the persistence of the structural sin of coloniality, the synod calls for a cultural conversion that also has social and ecological dimensions. The social aspect of that conversion entails that priority must be given to the rights of indigenous peoples and other peoples of the Amazon, including migrants and displaced peoples. While they are the subjects of their own liberation, the Church must be a prophetic voice, and an ally that stands in solidarity with them. It exalts “those who struggle courageously in favor of integral ecology in the Amazon” as martyrs, expanding the understanding of martyrdom to include those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for the protection of the Earth. The Church here is not called to “protect” but to be an “an ally of the Amazonian peoples in denouncing attacks on the life of the indigenous communities (Amazon Synod 2020), while acknowledging their own agency. Pope Francis uses the expression “social dialogue” to refer to a kind of relationship that not only favors “the preferential option on behalf of the poor, the marginalized and the excluded,” as affirmed in Puebla (1979), “but also respects them as having a leading role to play” (Francis 2020).

Cultural conversion demands the full recognition of the cultural diversity of the Amazon biodiversity. Such recognition admits that the Amazon system and its peoples possess “teachings for life,” a pattern of thinking that includes an integrated, interconnected “vision of reality.” The document also acknowledges the importance of *Teologia India* or Indigenous theology, “a theology with an Amazonian face, and popular piety” developed in dialogue with “the indigenous world, its culture and spirituality” (Amazon Synod 2020). Pope Francis, on his turn, reaffirms this understanding of interculturality by highlighting the value of the indigenous peoples’ cultural identity prior to and apart from any interaction with Christianity or the West.

Each of the peoples that has survived in the Amazon region possesses its own cultural identity and unique richness in our multicultural universe, thanks to the

close relationship established by the inhabitants with their surroundings in a non-deterministic symbiosis which is hard to conceive using mental categories imported from without (*ibid.*).

Culture, does not stand on its own. It is part of the symbiosis that constitutes the broader environment. That is why an ecological conversion is necessary. “If the ancestral cultures of the original peoples arose and developed in intimate contact with the natural environment, then it will be hard for them to remain unaffected once that environment is damaged.”

In a sweeping call for radical conversion, the synod proposes a new relationship with the Amazon’s peoples, which cares for nature and restores ancestral wisdom. In its attempt to generate alternatives focused on integral ecological development, the synod affirms:

We support projects that propose a solidary and sustainable economy, circular and ecological, both locally and internationally, at the level of research and on the ground, in the formal and informal sectors. Along these lines, it would be useful to support and promote cooperative initiatives in bio-production, forest reserves and sustainable consumption. The future of the Amazon is in the hands of us all, but it depends mainly on our immediately abandoning the current model that is destroying the forest rather than bringing wellbeing and is endangering this immense natural treasure and its guardians (Amazon Synod 2020).

In his response to the synod, Pope Francis affirms that we must follow the lead of the indigenous cosmologies and stop seeing the forest as a resource, seeing it instead as a being or multiple beings “with which we have to relate” (Francis 2020).

Whatever the limits of these two documents may be, they are roadmaps that point the way for a renewed Christian relationship with the peoples and cultures of the Amazon, which contrasts with the cultural genocide Christianity contributed to in the past, acknowledging indigenous ancestral knowledges as crucial for the aspiration of a common future. Among other things, the pandemic has revealed to the whole world the severity of the environmental crisis in which we find ourselves, and the limits not only of capitalism as our social model (Sousa Santos 2020), but also of the colonial, patriarchal, and racialized cultural structure that Anibal Quijano (2007) has called the colonial matrix of power. Christianity has historically been a key component of that matrix. By exposing ongoing systemic injustices, the pandemic challenges the global civilizational model and obliges us to seek alternative paths to the future. An intercultural dialogue that privileges the ancestral knowledges of indigenous and other traditional communities of the Amazon, moving them to the centerstage, seems to be a good place to start building a new path for the future.

The synod and Pope Francis’s response point to possible alternatives to the future of Christianity in Brazil and in Latin America, more broadly. While the synod communicates the novel idea of a Church that for the first time seems to be willing to listen to indigenous and black Brazilians, the emphasis on the documents that have emerged from this important event does not mean to say that such a turn is taking place at the initiative of the church. In the same way Abdias de Nascimento credited black and indigenous Brazilians, and not the Church, for the preservation of Afro-Brazilian

culture and religion through the creation of popular religion, one can say that the synod emerged as a result of the peoples of the Amazon's outcry, to which it seeks to respond. It is too early to know whether and how such response, for now expressed in two fine documents, will be materialized into concrete actions. But the words in these documents are revelatory of a possible path, which, as both documents indicate, must be led by the Indigenous peoples and the peoples of the Amazon, more broadly. While the synod had the participation of non-Catholics, including Pentecostal observers, it has been severely criticized by conservative sectors within the Catholic Church itself. Considering the urgency indigenous and other traditional communities are faced with, the fact that this was the Catholic synod with the largest grassroots participation in the life of the Church (around 80 thousand people participated in various assemblies, forums, and meetings that elaborated the pre-synodal document with the help of NGOs, leaders of other religions and scientists) is a promising sign of true partnership and collaboration (Ramalho 2019). Around 179 of the 390 peoples of the pan-Amazonia attended those encounters. As subjects who have resisted genocide for so long, they need, demand, and deserve concrete actions to change that reality.

While the pandemic has amplified structural injustices, including racism and the continuous genocide of indigenous and black Brazilians, ongoing initiatives among grassroots Christian communities during the pandemic point to the contrasting roles of Christianity in the region. Those hopeful signs are reinforced in the intercultural approach seen in both the Amazon Synod and Pope Francis' *Querida Amazonia*. Resulting from a participatory process, of which the voices of the indigenous and other peoples of the Amazon were constitutive, these documents offer language that may prove to be in coming years a significant roadmap for a future epistemological turn, through which the ancestral wisdom of the peoples of the Amazon emerges in a situation of parity with the traditions and teachings of Christianity. Whether that is possible to happen without the complete dismantling of Christianity's imperial structures, we are still to see.

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