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TRANSFORMATIONS in BRAZILIAN CATHOLICISM

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Contemporary Brazilian Catholicism and Healing Practices: Notes on Environmentalism and Medicalization



Juliano Florczak Almeida is a Brazilian anthropologist. His doctorate thesis was about the Catholic Church and healing practices in Brazil. He also has experience in ethnobotanic studies, material dimensions of religion, and history. He has published many papers in scientific journals and a book, *Bom Jardim dos Santos* (Editora da UFRGS, 2016), about the presence of plants in religious rituals in the South of Brazil. In 2014, he received First Place in the Heloísa Alberto Torres Award, offered by the Associação Brasileira de Antropologia (ABA). Currently, he is an associated researcher at Núcleo de Estudos da Religião, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (NER-UFRGS).

INTRODUCTION

Anthropological studies on Brazilian Catholicism have traditionally focused on popular variants of religious practice and their relationship with official Catholicism. Within research on the interface between Catholicism and healing practices, scholars have highlighted how unofficial variants of Catholicism guide popular healing practices.¹ As a result, researchers have given special attention to figures such as healers (*benzedeiros* and *curandeiros*), their rituals, and the conflicts they have with members of the Catholic hierarchy or doctors. By privileging the above mentioned aspects, this body of literature has emphasized basic characteristics of popular Catholicism: inclusiveness, openness to other religious traditions, and difference from official Catholicism.²

Recent anthropological perspectives point to the benefits of investing research in not only marginal but also core and official social practices. Bruno Latour³ noticed that when anthropologists have studied in the tropics, they focused on central aspects of these globally marginal communities. However, according to Latour, when anthropologists redirected its investigations to metropolitan societies, they were contented with observing the marginal elements of these societies.⁴ Latour suggested that it was now necessary to think anthropologically also about the center

- 1 Juliano Florczak Almeida, *Bom Jardim Dos Santos: Plantas, Religiosidades Populares e Seus Fluxos Em Guarani Das Missões (RS)*, 1st ed. (Porto Alegre: UFRGS Editora, 2016); M. Cecília S. Minayo, "Representações Da Cura No Catolicismo Popular," in *Saúde e Doença: Um Olhar Antropológico*, ed. P.C. Alves and M.C.S. Minayo (Rio de Janeiro: Editora FIOCRUZ, 1994), 57-71; Raymundo Heraldo Maués, "Catolicismo e Xamanismo: Comparação Entre a Cura No Movimento Carismático e Na Pajelança Rural Amazônica," *Ilha* 4, no. 2 (2010): 51-77; Ático Vilas-Boas Mota, *Rezas, Benzeduras et Cetera: Medicina Popular Em Goiás* (Goiânia: Oriente, 1977); Elda Rizzo Oliveira, *O Que é Benzeção* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1985); O. F. Leal, "Benzedeiros e Bruxas: Sexo, Gênero e Sistema de Cura Tradicional," *Cadernos de Antropologia* 70, no. 5 (1992): 7-22; Melvina Araújo, *Das Ervas Medicinais à Fitoterapia* (Cotia, SP: Ateliê Editorial, 2002).
- 2 Douglas Texeira Monteiro, *Os Errantes Do Novo Século: Um Estudo Sobre o Surto Milenarista Do Contestado* (São Paulo: Duas cidades, 1974); Pedro Ribeiro de Oliveira, "Religiosidade Popular Na América Latina," *REB* 32, no. 126 (1972): 354-64; Pedro Ribeiro de Oliveira, *Religião e Dominação de Classe: Gênese, Estrutura e Função Do Catolicismo Romanizado No Brasil* (Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes, 1985).
- 3 Bruno Latour, *Jamais Fomos Modernos: Ensaio de Antropologia Simétrica* (Rio de Janeiro: Ed. 34, 1994).
- 4 Latour, *Jamais Fomos Modernos*.

of the center.⁵ While this research program resulted in Latour's important work on scientific communities, it also prompted scholars to expand the field of anthropology by examining other hegemonic groups.⁶

Encouraged by the aforementioned approaches, I analyze current healing practices promoted by members of the Catholic hierarchy in Brazil. Analyzing practices endorsed by the Catholic Church makes it possible to point out that its *modus operandi* is not absolutely distinct from the practices of popular Catholicism;⁷ both are characterized by porosity.⁸ By porosity I mean the inclusive character of Catholicism, which opens itself up to the circulation of practices and encompasses different modalities of worship both diachronically and synchronically.⁹

To grasp this *modus operandi*, I analyze Brazilian Catholic priests' best-selling books about health and healing as well as newspaper reports and interviews with these authors. Through the analysis of three case studies, I observe the circulation of ideas about health and healing techniques, and I provide an overview of the main trajectories of healing practices within contemporary Brazilian Catholicism. I describe and analyze practices proposed by Friar Romano Zago, a Franciscan brother who became famous for creating a medicinal product based on aloe and known as *babosa*; Father Paulo Wendling, a diocesan priest who promotes holistic therapy; and Father Renato Roque Barth, a Jesuit priest and advocate of a healing technique called BiosHealth (Biosáude).¹⁰ In addition, I analyze the practices of

5 Latour, *Jamais Fomos Modernos*.

6 Emerson Giumbelli, "Para Além Do 'Trabalho de Campo': Reflexões Supostamente Malinowskianas," *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais* 17, no. 48 (2002): 91–107, <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0102-69092002000100007>; Bruno Latour, *Ciencia En Accion. Cómo Seguir a Los Científicos e Ingenieros a Través de La Sociedad* (Barcelona: Open University Press, 1992).

7 By official Catholicism I mean the religious practices of members of Catholic hierarchy. On the other hand, by popular Catholicism I mean the religious practices of lay people. This is a methodological differentiation. This study aims to show that both variants of Catholicism have the same *modus operandi*, which is characterized by the Catholicism's inclusiveness.

8 Juliano Florczak Almeida, "Atos Dos Bons Samaritanos: Romanização e Medicalização Na Vida de Religiosos Católicos" (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 2019).

9 Almeida, "Atos Dos Bons Samaritanos."

10 Friar Romano Zago is a Franciscan brother who was born in 1932. In the '90s, he became famous because of his herbal product. Father Paulo Wendling is a diocesan priest who was born in 1954. He is the author of six books about holistic therapy. Father Renato Roque Barth is a Jesuit priest who was born in 1939. In 1997, he was one of the founders of *Associação Brasileira de Saúde*



“interior healing” proposed by other friars and priests in order to grasp the complexities of healing techniques within contemporary Brazilian Catholicism.¹¹

Such an approach enables us to notice how two big processes permeate the healing practices within current Brazilian Catholicism. The first process is medicalization, today consolidated in Brazil as a result of a long historical process that involves the medical corporation in almost all healing practices.¹² The second is a certain environmentalization of healing practices promoted by Catholic friars and priests,¹³ through which friars and priests understand that staying in tune with “nature” is a condition for healing. These crossings seem to point to Catholicism’s inclusiveness¹⁴, which characterizes also its official variants.¹⁵ The relationship between religion and health is recurrent within Catholicism due partially to the long tradition emerged from the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan, whose message suggests a relation between Christian people and healing practices. Paying attention to this relationship is fruitful to grasp the porosities I referred to earlier. In the next section, I present the cases of a friar and two priests marked by the above-mentioned crossings. Getting to know them enables us to also understand the tensions religious leaders themselves encounter in their relationships with doctors and other medical professionals: Priests who advocate techniques for promoting health

Popular (Brazilian Association of Popular Health - ABRASP), a non-governmental institution that is present in many Brazilian regions. It is a mistake to evaluate how central these priests are, because the centrality is a relative feature (Márcio Goldman, *Como Funciona a Democracia: Uma Teoria Etnográfica Da Política* (Rio de Janeiro: 7 Letras, 2006)). Giumbelli (“Para Além Do ‘Trabalho de Campo’”) says that the anthropologists should take advantage of the possibility of investigating everything. But I highlight that Zago is member of the Catholic hierarchy, as well as Wendling and Barth. Therefore, they are authenticated by the Catholic Church.

- 11 Cf. Emerson José Sena da Silveira, “A Cura Interior No Catolicismo Carismático: Tecnologias de Si e Psicologização Da Religião,” *Debates Do NER* 8, no. 12 (2007): 45–79.
- 12 Beatriz Teixeira Weber, “As Artes de Curar: Medicina, Religião, Magia e Positivismo Na República Rio-Grandense - 1889/1928” (doctorate thesis, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 1997), <http://www.repositorio.unicamp.br/handle/REPOSIP/280635>.
- 13 Isabel Cristina de Moura Carvalho and Carlos Alberto Steil, “A Sacralização Da Natureza e a ‘Naturalização’ Do Sagrado: Aportes Teóricos Para a Compreensão Dos Entrecruzamentos Entre Saúde, Ecologia e Espiritualidade,” *Ambiente e Sociedade* 11, no. 2 (2008): 289–305, <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1414-753X2008000200006>.
- 14 Carlos Alberto Steil, “Renovação Carismática Católica: Porta de Entrada Ou de Saída Do Catolicismo? Uma Etnografia Do Grupo São José, Porto Alegre (RS),” *Religião e Sociedade* 24, no. 1 (2004): 11–36.
- 15 Almeida, “Atos Dos Bons Samaritanos.”

struggle to discern whether they should construe their work as a complement or alternative to official bio-scientific medicine. I begin by discussing the ways that environmentalist ideology influences the practice of contemporary Catholic advocates of health and healing.

THE APOSTLE OF ALOE

The questions of where to find the sacred and how to get in touch with divinity have not always had the same answer in the history of Catholicism. Certainly, churches have played a prominent role in the spatialization of the sacred in Christianity over the centuries. In his classic study of memory, Maurice Halbwachs¹⁶ draws attention to the importance Catholicism places on periodic gatherings of the faithful in churches. In addition, Halbwachs argues that creative work of tradition can also build holy spaces and highlights the wide extent of what can become the place of the divine: “[...] for the saints everything is holy, and there is no place apparently so profane where Christians cannot evoke God.”¹⁷

Not by chance, religious experience has been lived elsewhere as well. In the fourth century, the Mediterranean tradition of the hermits, which expanded along with the expansion of Christianity itself,¹⁸ found the sacred in the isolation of natural spaces. In line with this movement, in the 16th to 18th centuries, in colonial Brazil, hermitages were erected in the hinterlands and in places far from urban centers, which gave rise to most of the country’s main Catholic shrines.¹⁹ Nature, as a place of experience of the Sacred, appears as a new element of Catholic practices in history in different ways and times, according to the changes in the cult.

This long-duration tradition, however, gains other configurations when it joins the shift observed in recent decades of internalizing the environmental issue. This process is identified in different spheres of social life, whether in Brazil or in other parts of the world.

16 Maurice Halbwachs, *Memória Coletiva* (São Paulo: Vértice, 1990).

17 Halbwachs, *Memória Coletiva*, 227.

18 André Vauchez, “Santidade,” in *Enciclopédia Einaudi*, vol. 12 (Lisboa; Porto: Casa da Moeda/Imprensa Nacional, 1987), 287–300.

19 Carlos Alberto Steil, *O Sertão Das Romarias: Um Estudo Antropológico Sobre o Santuário de Bom Jardim Da Lapa* (Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes, 1996).



According to Steil and Carvalho,²⁰ it is possible to notice in current times a link between certain cultivation of the self through ascetic practices and the environmental sensitivity expressed in the ecologic concern. This link characterizes the healing practices of Catholic friars and priests and engenders unique biographies and ways of life. By taking part in Catholicism, some other elements linked to Christian cosmologies are joined to the current environmental movement. Therefore, a double conversion is taking place: from Catholicism to environmentalism and the transformations promoted by Catholicism in environmentalism. This is what we observe when we follow the trajectory of Friar Romano Zago, who in recent years has become a kind of apostle of aloe.

The Franciscan Friar Zago considers the recipe that made him famous to be simple. According to his best-seller originally written in Portuguese and translated into eleven other languages, he decided to spread it as far as he could.²¹ It was enough to add a certain species of aloe (*Aloe arborescens*), honey and a few spoonfuls of *cachaça*²² to obtain the cure of one of the great evils of humanity: cancer.²³ The recipe was ideally to be used by the poor people whom he assisted in parishes of rural Rio Grande do Sul state, in South Brazil. They gave him good feedback after using the recipe. The simplicity of the formula can be related to Catholic liberation theology's empowering the poor. Encouraged by this understanding, Friar Zago became a sort of apostle of aloe. After learning the recipe in a conversation with confreres, Zago advertised it in the places where he worked as Franciscan friar, as well as in radio and TV programs.

Unlike the simplicity of the recipe, understanding why it was so efficient was not easy to Friar Zago. He needed to study books published in different parts of the world to understand that the reason for aloe's success in combating cancer did not

20 Carvalho and Steil, "A Sacralização Da Natureza."

21 Romano Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura! Manual Que Ensina, de Maneira Prática e Econômica, a Tratar, Sem Sair de Casa, Do Câncer e de Outras Doenças, Sem Mutilações, Sem Aplicações Nem Remédios, Sem Efeitos Colaterais* (Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes, 1997).

22 A Brazilian distillate made with sugar cane.

23 To elaborate this tale, besides drawing on Zago's book *Câncer Tem Cura!*, I also used information given by Friar João Renato Puhl, confrere of Zago's who studies his trajectory and his production. Puhl gave me an e-mail interview in May 2020.

come from one or other substance that aloe contained, but from the synergy of the different active principles encapsulated in the plant. After long discussion, Zago concluded: “This concept of synergism cannot be stressed enough in understanding the combination of aloe. It is the combination that makes the plant perfect.”²⁴

The friar guarantees that aloe’s perfection comes from the fact that it is one of God’s creatures: “You are the essence of God, perfect, beautiful and harmonious,” says Zago, in his ritual of harvesting aloe, that includes a sort of conversation with aloe, as he transcribes in his book.²⁵ The cure is in nature, because creatures that remain purely divine also are in nature. Thus, one ecological narrative connects with another, theologically Christian-oriented narrative.

Human beings are different from the pure creatures of nature, says Friar Zago, demonstrating some sadness. They insist on living in sin, on envying others’ success, on nurturing anger and grudges, on performing other unscrupulous acts. Sexual practices, envy, anger, and resentment, among other sins, provoke what the Franciscan calls “spiritual pollution”, which he lists among the causes of cancer.²⁶ Another cause of cancer would be “psychic pollution,” that is, all shocking events that affect human beings’ emotions. Zago’s third cause of cancer is “physical pollution,” which includes general air and water pollutants, pesticides and food preservatives, gas emissions and the byproducts of atomic technologies, as well as alcohol and other drugs. The sin is considered a pollution that causes cancer to both the environment and to human beings. As Zago said in an interview, these pollutants are relatively equivalent: “Drugs, excess alcohol, tobacco, pesticides, herbicides, etc., help the progress of cancer. Consume meat in moderation. We have been taught that eating meat is equal to being well fed. This ‘truth’ be taken *cum granu salis*.” Zago’s discourse reinforces the already traced connection between ecological and theological narratives.

Considering that the causes of illness are pollution and the cure is found in nature, then the appropriate cure is to tune in with nature. The notions of “psychic” and

24 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!*, 85.

25 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!*, 116.

26 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!*, 36–37.



“spiritual” pollution underline the thesis that the cure is found in the individual. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that self-healing means taking the path of tuning in with nature, which is also the path of God. To attune oneself to nature now means to attune oneself to the Creator Divinity. Zago starts from the principle that God made all things, the lilies that sway in the field with the wind, the birds that roar there, and the aloe that keeps the synergy of its composites. Within Catholic cosmology, children’s lack of knowledge and innocence bring them closer to the divine.²⁷ They are unaware of sin and evil’s wicked tricks, which often appear in adults’ actions.²⁸ But what is the purity of childhood, Zago insists, if we compare it to those beings of nature that are nothing more than what God has made of them? All the more reason, Zago believes, to bet on his own medicine, simple and even “naïve” as he admits it is.²⁹

To make and consume the aloe formula to cure cancer is, in some measure, to ritualize conversion. It means returning to innocence or being willing to do so, and repenting of one’s sins. Consuming Zago’s medicinal aloe is analogous to the sacrament of reconciliation. Friar Zago does not seem to offer a remedy, but an invitation to the death of the “old man” and the birth of a “new man,” as stated in Chapter Four of the Christian New Testament’s Epistle to the Ephesians: “Abandon the way you lived before, the old man who corrupts himself with deceptive passions. May your mentality be renewed spiritually. Put on the new man, created according to God, in righteousness and holiness of truth.”

The most relevant aspect of this invitation is the idea that the “old man” is a polluted subject. Polluted in the sense of being stained by sin, living in a polluted environment, which condemns the person to suffer in the flesh the consequences of such a situation. On the other hand, the converted subject is also a dedicated environmentalist. Friar Zago builds a double process of conversion, from Catholicism to environmentalism and vice versa.

27 Maya Mayblin, *Gender, Catholicism, and Morality in Brazil: Virtuous Husbands, Powerful Wives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

28 Mayblin, *Gender, Catholicism, and Morality in Brazil*.

29 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!*, 38.

In either situation, that of the polluted person or a converted one, human beings are their environment. By breathing polluted air, living in an environment marked by atomic accidents, eating food produced with pesticides and preservatives, the human being reflects the landscape, reminding the anthropology of Tim Ingold.³⁰ On the other hand, the human in search of conversion walks towards harmony with idyllic nature.

Like conversion in a general Catholic cosmology, harmonization with idyllic nature involves a sacrifice whose root paradigm³¹ is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Other agents, however, can also be called upon, since also they can make analogous mediations. For having the capacity to mediate the relationship with the divinity, these agents need to have some characteristics, especially perfection, the possession of gifts and the mission given by God to his creature, attributes that Zago observes in the aloe. Witnessing the presence of a certain biblical culture in the daily life of members of the Catholic hierarchy, the friar describes his ritual of harvesting aloe as a conversation with the plant, which he suggests is the outline of a prayer.³² In this conversation, he claims to seek not to cause harm to the plant, but to value it as the perfect creature of God:

Hello, beautiful creature! I am not here to hurt you. On the contrary, as I know you are beneficial, I ask you to give me what our Creator gave you. I need it. All that God created is good, and He saw that it was good. You are the essence of God, perfect, beautiful, and harmonious. God has deposited rich substances within you. I wish to take advantage of them.³³

In this ritual of harvesting aloe, the plant reminds the biblical parable of the wheat kernel. According to this parable, presented in the Chapter 12 of the John's gospel, the wheat kernel must die to produce many seeds. Similarly, according to Zago, cutting down the aloe would not mean its death or any harm to it. On the contrary,

30 Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, Social Anthropology (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203818336>.

31 Victor Turner, *Dramas, Campos e Metáforas: Ação Simbólica Na Sociedade Humana* (Niterói, RJ: Ed. da UFF, 2008).

32 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!*, 116.

33 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!* 116.



it is precisely the opportunity to “[...] feel the ecstasy of fertility” and to overcome death, like in the biblical narrative, and use the gifts that God has given to the plant:

If I do not collect them, they will never be used. Just as all living beings, you were born, grew, but will die, returning to the dust that produced you. But if I pick you, you will offer all your substances and give everything good you know. So, let me pick you as I would a beautiful rose. Only you know the wonders you possess internally and feel the ecstasy of fertility.³⁴

Zago seems to be trying to convince the plant to follow the divine project, the mission planned by God when He created it:

[...] You will suffer a little, but I know no other way of taking you so that you can do the job for which what you were created. Come with me, come! [...] Take the opportunity and perform the mission that the Lord planned when He created you. It is now time for ecstasy.³⁵

In arguing that the cure is in tuning in with nature, Friar Zago constitutes, in the practices of healing cancer with aloe, a harmonious tuning between environmental and Catholic cosmologies. These practices suggest the existence of tensions with official medicine, whose hegemony in the field of healing practices entails that other therapies can be complementary or alternative to it. In the next topic, I analyze how these tensions between confrontation and complementarity take place in the field of Catholicism.

COMPLEMENTARY OR ALTERNATIVE PRACTICES?

In Novo Hamburgo, a city in the metropolitan region of Porto Alegre, capital of Rio Grande do Sul state, it is possible to consult with Father Paulo Wendling,³⁶

34 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!*, 116.

35 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!*, 116.

36 This description is informed by the books of the priest Paulo Wendling, *A Vida Cura a Vida: O Uso de Recursos Naturais Como Terapia* (Passo Fundo, RS: Berthier, 2012); Paulo Wendling, *Cuidando Da Vida Com as Plantas de Deus* (Passo Fundo, RS: Berthier, 2009); as well as by an interview he gave to me, Carlos Alberto Steil and Taylor Pedroso de Aguiar on September 29, 2015 at the headquarters of the Diocesan Centre of Pastoral and Life Support (Centro Diocesano de Pastoral e Apoio à Vida - CEDIPAVI), coordinated by Father Wendling.

a Catholic diocesan priest who is also dedicated to healing the sick. He differs from Friar Zago for not having a predilection for aloe. He seeks to spread healing practices based on the idea that “life heals life,” an expression that appears in the title of one of his popular books.³⁷ Regardless of this difference, the priest’s recommendations to the sick are remarkably similar to the Friar Zago’s advice in his own book.³⁸ In fact, the two parallel trajectories share the same horizon, marked by the environmentalization of Catholic healing practices. It is not by chance that in the pages written by Wendling, health becomes synonymous with harmony with nature, to the point that paradise is defined as the place where the “naturist ideal” is achieved:

The normal state of the human being is health. While they live according to the natural laws, they do not know the disease and die on completing the biological cycle. In paradise, man and woman achieve health because they fully reach the naturist ideal. But as they move away from nature and transgress its laws, they lose their health, including their life, in the middle of the road.³⁹

A large part of one of his books is dedicated to re-educating his audience about their daily food consumption. His main recommendation in this arena is “[...] to be attentive to the teachings of ‘MOTHER NATURE.’”⁴⁰ For example, the relevance of the consumption of milk and dairy products, which Wendling considers to be at odds with the “natural law” and therefore recommends its elimination, comes into debate:

“MOTHER NATURE” made a milk appropriate to the conditions of each species. Human milk is suitable for humans. [...] Animals respect the natural law. No female takes and keeps the milk to give it to the ‘baby’ the other day. [...] Note well: man is the only being in nature who drinks milk from a mother who is not his own after reaching adulthood.⁴¹

37 Wendling, *A Vida Cura a Vida*.

38 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!*

39 Wendling, *A Vida Cura a Vida*, 31.

40 Wendling, *A Vida Cura a Vida*, 136, emphasis in original.

41 Wendling, *A Vida Cura a Vida*, 137, emphasis in original.



To achieve harmony with nature and therefore with health, Father Wendling suggests the practice of a holistic therapy that takes “[...] the person as a whole: physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, social, professional and ecological aspects.”⁴² Such a therapy seeks “[...] holistic harmony, i.e., when there is balance between the various dimensions of human life.”⁴³

Thus, healing practices cannot be restricted to bodily remedies. They must be attentive to food, as said above, but also to different dimensions of the human being: body, mind, and soul. This has implications for their healing practices. First, Father Wendling considers that it is not possible to treat organs or even diseases without taking care of the person: “It is not enough to look for a remedy for the disease without treating the patient. That is why I want to frame the use of plants as therapy in the context of holistic therapy.”⁴⁴ Another consequence of Wendling’s understanding is a continuity or even equivalence between the physical and the spiritual, in which sickness becomes an opportunity to reflect on the way we are living: “Sickness reveals our own fragility, our human condition of being sinners, imperfect.”⁴⁵ Similarly to Zago’s conception of the health-disease process, for Wendling,⁴⁶ sins emerge as causes of illness. To get sick is a sign that one is not on God’s way and, at the same time, an opportunity to take up God’s way.

Wendling’s healing practices repeat the same invitation to conversion found in Zago’s work, a conversion capable of producing the “new man” of the New Testament, now also affected by the internalization of planet’s environmental afflictions:

Health in the NEW MILLENNIUM requires each of us to turn to nature, to God. Knowing and following the natural laws is a requirement. Without changing habits, without changing the way we think and act, it will not be possible to breathe health in the planet [...]. Indeed, without a deep conversion of all of us, we will be increasingly plunged into the darkness of sickness and death...⁴⁷

42 Wendling, *Cuidando Da Vida Com as Plantas de Deus*, 7.

43 Wendling, *Cuidando Da Vida Com as Plantas de Deus*, 7.

44 Wendling, *A Vida Cura a Vida*, 191.

45 Wendling, *A Vida Cura a Vida*, 21.

46 Wendling, *A Vida Cura a Vida*.

47 Wendling, *A Vida Cura a Vida*, 25, emphasis in original.

According to Wendling, this process of conversion, in which God's path is also the path of nature, must also affect the Catholic Church, which should adopt an ecological attitude, a way of promoting Life, the Creator's work:

The Church must also be "ECOLOGICAL" ... Our evangelization needs to lead us to the sources of nature, of life, reason why the Church must make us believe with the eyes of the heart and see with the eyes of the flesh the crucial problems of nature, which require conversion and Christian postures from all of us, without the destructive spirit of the old "Crusades." Our God is the God of Life, the God of Creation. Therefore, caring for his work is the task of all his children, but especially of Christians... It is not good to use pesticides to do a "chemical weeding" in the churchyard or Catholic cemetery and then pray with the God of Life, of Creation...⁴⁸

The holism that enables the continuity or equivalence of physical and spiritual problems refers to Romantic medicine, a current that seems to play a significant role in healing techniques used in contemporary Brazilian Catholicism. "Romantic medicine is a medicine of the human subject, a medicine of totality," Georges Gusdorf writes.⁴⁹ Wendling⁵⁰ insists that he follows Hippocratic teachings. He points out that, at the time of the medicine's founding, the sick were sent to "sanatoriums" dedicated to the god Aesculapius and the treatment they underwent involved a change in eating habits and the use of "natural resources." This experience was a prelude to the moment when the sick participated in mystical-religious rituals.⁵¹ "Without a detoxification of the body, there is no intervention of the god Aesculapius to effect a healing at the level of the soul," concludes the priest.⁵² He adds: "[...] without changes in our lifestyle, which includes way of being, thinking, acting, and eating, no miracle will happen. There are no magic formulas that will restore health, balance."⁵³

48 Wendling, *A Vida Cura a Vida*, 25, emphasis in original.

49 Georges Gusdorf, *L'homme Romantique* (Paris: Les Éditions Payot, 1984), 259.

50 Wendling, *A Vida Cura a Vida*; Wendling, *Cuidando Da Vida Com as Plantas de Deus*.

51 Wendling, *A Vida Cura a Vida*, 33–35; Wendling, *Cuidando Da Vida Com as Plantas de Deus*, 10–11.

52 Wendling, *Cuidando Da Vida Com as Plantas de Deus*, 11.

53 Wendling, *Cuidando Da Vida Com as Plantas de Deus*, 11. By appealing to the origins of the bio-medical scientific tradition in ancient Greek religion, Wendling suggests that official bio-scientific



Zago also emphasizes holism. This similarity can be noticed in the equivalence between physical, psychic, and spiritual causes for diseases, as well as when he suggests that the perfection of aloe derives from the synergy of its whole, rather than from any of its substances. Holism also provides Zago with the explanation for the lack of success of many scientific studies about aloe: “The problem with scientific tests is that they do not analyze the whole plant, and this may not meet the expectations of the theory, leading the conclusion that the combination is ineffective....”⁵⁴ The Franciscan also demonstrates a great admiration for homeopathy, which derives from Romantic-era efforts to reform medical science.⁵⁵ Zago claimed that, “Personally, I believe that the evolution of homeopathy will soon enable the cure of diseases, even the most serious of them, only with the use of water as raw material.”⁵⁶

This discussion highlights the relationship between official and medical healing practices promoted within Catholicism. The relationship between these two fields may take the form of confrontation or complementarity. On the one hand, health practices proposed by religious leaders may constitute an alternative to official medicine. On the other, they may advance in parallel and complement official medicine. The analysis of the relationship between medicine and religious practices has proved fruitful in diverse religious contexts, including in the Brazilian spiritualistic field, which includes Spiritism, Umbanda and other religious practices,⁵⁷ but also in Brazilian Catholicism.⁵⁸

Wendling himself discusses that topic. However, besides using other terminology, his debate makes the discussion more complex. He questions the very notion of choice implicit in both the alternative and complementary relationship between religious practices and medicine:

medicine forgot Hippocratic teachings. He affirms these teachings took care of the whole human being, not just the body.

54 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!*, 85.

55 Madel Therezinha Luz, *A Arte de Curar versus a Ciência Das Doenças: História Social Da Homeopatia No Brasil* (Porto Alegre: Editora Rede UNIDA, 2014).

56 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!*

57 Cf. Emerson Giumbelli, “Espiritismo e Medicina: Introdução, Subversão, Complementaridade,” in *Orixás e Espíritos: O Debate Interdisciplinar Na Pesquisa Contemporânea*, ed. Artur César Isaia (Uberlândia: EDUFU, 2006), 283–304.

58 Almeida, “Atos Dos Bons Samaritanos.”



Therefore, holistic therapy does not present itself as an alternative [i.e., complementary therapy] to the model of treatment that exists in current society. If it were an alternative [i.e., complementary therapy], it would be just another form. Holistic Therapy aims to balance what is unbalanced and this is not only done through the use of herbal remedies like most people think and act, but through a profound and sometimes radical change in the way of being, thinking, living, feeding, working... It is not enough to put a pharmacy with natural medicines next to the chemical pharmacy... Remember: if medicine and medication were enough to cure, we wouldn't have patients or diseases...⁵⁹

Wendling challenges the basic principles that underpin official medicine: the whole rather than some organ; the person rather than the disease; prevention rather than reduction of symptoms; change of habits rather than use of medicines. However, he does not recommend breaking with official medicine. Something similar is found in the practices spread by Friar Zago, who does not recommend the abandonment of chemotherapy and radiation. Still, he writes that these practices are “[...] a true assault on the body!”⁶⁰ To Zago, officials who promote these methods wrongly assume that: “[...] by extirpating the sick organ, the healing of the patient would happen as if by magic.”⁶¹ Instead of suggesting the suppression of these therapies, he advises the sick to take aloe along with chemotherapy and radiation: “If you are treated with medicines prescribed by your doctor, or are to have radiation, chemotherapy or something similar, nothing prevents you from simultaneously treating yourself with aloe.”⁶² The hegemony of official medicine, backed by the power of the state, seems to force religious healing practices, including practices associated with Catholicism, into the position of complementary medicine. In an interview with me, Zago ratified the dominant role of doctors in healing and ensuring bodily health, an activity that priests take on only in a supporting or complementary role:

The task of healing the body is a doctor's responsibility. But as a priest, if I can help someone to heal, I do this work with great pleasure and without charge.

59 Wendling, *A Vida Cura a Vida*, 33.

60 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!*

61 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!*

62 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!*



[This person] is a human being who must be helped. If I can do it! And if I know how to do it, let us work! (Interview with me, May 29, 2020.)

A tension arises between the complementary and alternative relationships: although priests question the principles of official medicine, they often recommend that the sick adopt their healing practices alongside and as a complement to techniques favored by doctors. Such accommodation seems to be related to the ability of Catholicism to incorporate diverse practices of different traditions, as will be detailed in the next section.

MEDICALIZATION AND CATHOLIC PRACTICES

Medical professional organizations currently hold the monopoly on legitimate healing practices in Brazil.⁶³ Several aspects of life in the country are also marked by a process of medicalization, from human reproduction⁶⁴ to hospitals.⁶⁵ In the face of this scenario, healing practices of priests or friars often affect doctors and their organizations, who believe that they are competent to address all issues relating to healing practices and technologies. And sometimes, doctors challenge members of the Catholic hierarchy, especially if their practices assume the character of alternatives to official medicine.

That was the case of Renato Roque Barth, a Jesuit priest who promotes the BiosHealth (*Biosaúde*) method in Brazil's Central-Western state of Mato Grosso. He promotes a set of health practices that in many ways resembles those advocated by Friar Zago and Father Wendling. In 2011, Barth was denounced by the Regional Council of Medicine of Mato Grosso (CRM-MT) for illegally practicing medicine.⁶⁶ The national press, historically a privileged actor in the medicalization of diverse arenas of Brazilian social life, also denounced Barth.⁶⁷ The hearing of the

63 Weber, "As Artes de Curar."

64 Fabíola Rohden, "Histórias e Tensões Em Torno Da Medicalização Da Reprodução," *Revista Gênero* 6, no. 1 (2006): 213–24.

65 Gisele Sanglard, "A Construção Dos Espaços de Cura No Brasil: Entre a Caridade e a Medicalização," *Revista Esboços* 13, no. 16 (2006): 11–33.

66 The Council of Medicine is the organization responsible for regulating the exercise of medicine.

67 Almeida, "Atos Dos Bons Samaritanos; Giumbelli, "Espiritismo e Medicina."

case was suspended for lack of evidence.⁶⁸

The country's leading television station released the reports denouncing Barth and made it clear that only charlatans propose alternative (not complementary) treatments to official medicine: "And now a serious denunciation of healers: patients would have died after being convinced by a priest to leave the hospital and adhere to an alternative treatment."⁶⁹ In the video, the CRM-MT vice-president, Dr. Arlan de Azevedo Ferreira, affirms: "What was informed was that there was a priest offering a substitute and curative treatment for the disease."⁷⁰ The reporter gathered anonymous testimonies of patients and family members: "He spoke like this: either you stop [the official medicine treatment] or I do not cure your son. I guarantee I will heal him, but you must stop chemotherapy. Because it is chemotherapy that is going to kill your son."⁷¹ Barth's lawyer was asked by the reporter precisely about his requirement that people abandon other healing practices, to which he responded: "At no time, to anyone, did the priest, or anyone who uses BiosHealth, recommend abandoning conventional treatment."⁷²

These denunciations were reprinted by various newspapers:

In his defense, in the lawsuit filed by the CRM (Regional Council of Medicine) of Mato Grosso, Father Renato Roque Barth maintained the conviction that the urine-based potion that he produces cures cancer and AIDS, among other illnesses. The council accuses him of medical charlatanism (*curandeirismo*).⁷³

BiosHealth offers an array of alternative treatments including the ingestion of urine to cure diabetes and promote the detoxification of the body; BiosHealth

68 João Inácio Wenzel, "Deixem o Padre Trabalhar," Revista IHU On-Line, February 28, 2011, <http://www.ihu.unisinos.br/173-noticias/noticias-2011/41031-deixem-o-padre-trabalhar>.

69 Marcelo Canellas, "E Agora Uma Denúncia Grave de Curandeirismo," Fantástico (Rio de Janeiro, February 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iD1mf6huGIw&t=39s>.

70 Canellas, "E Agora Uma Denúncia Grave de Curandeirismo."

71 Canellas, "E Agora Uma Denúncia Grave de Curandeirismo."

72 Canellas, "E Agora Uma Denúncia Grave de Curandeirismo."

73 Paulo Pes, "Padre Continua a Defender Que Poção à Base de Urina Cura Câncer," Paulo Pes Site, November 26, 2010, <https://www.paulopes.com.br/2010/11/padre-continua-defender-que-pocao-base.html#.XsQfKzlv-YI>.



also promotes special diets that involve eating clay and medicinal herbs.⁷⁴

As can be seen from the above extracts, the fact that Father Barth prescribes treatment involving the ingestion of urine seems to have intensified the polemics. Getting to know the details of this healing practice allows us to make links with the other healing practices addressed here. The Brazilian Association of Popular Health (ABRASP), an association founded by Renato Barth to bring together health agents who spread the BiosHealth method in all regions of Brazil, presents in its website a piece on urination therapy written by Áton Inoue, Barth's mentor in the field of BiosHealth.⁷⁵ The piece defines urine as "sacred water" and suggests that there is a similarity between urine and amniotic fluid:

Let us consider the case of the fetus, which grows inside sac of the uterus called amniotic fluid [*sic*]. The fetus grows by taking a daily amount of amniotic fluid. Urine is like amniotic fluid in its contents. Furthermore, according to studies on fetuses, the last few months they are urinating 500 milliliters daily and taking almost the same amount of their own urine (amniotic fluid). This fact is enough to argue that urine is not a dirty thing. If God prepares the healthiest and most favorable conditions for a new life to be born, how would it be possible to put fetuses in a sea of amnion urine? God already knew of course that urine is the holy water. The idea that urine is dirty is only a result of education and culture in our modern society, which is very much linked to economic interests against it.

However, the therapeutic use of urine would entail other parallel curative actions. Inoue concludes that urine intake should be associated with a transformation of diet and the practice of fasting: "The foundation of Urinotherapy is diet-fasting. If you do not change the diet, the urine always comes out ugly and you cannot expect the desirable effects."⁷⁶ According to the booklet of a course in Bioenergetics

74 Pollyana Araújo, "Juiz Determina Que Denúncias Do CRM Contra Padre de MT Sejam Apuradas," G1 MT, May 23, 2011, <http://g1.globo.com/mato-grosso/noticia/2011/05/juiz-determina-que-denuncias-do-crm-contra-padre-de-mt-sejam-apuradas.html>.

75 ABRASP, "Biosaúde Brasil," 2020, <http://www.biosaudebrasil.org/>.

76 Áton Inoue, "Urina: Uma Mestra Brilhante Para Nossa Vida!," ABRASP Bio Saúde, n.d., <http://www.biosaudebrasil.org/tratamentos/#uri>.

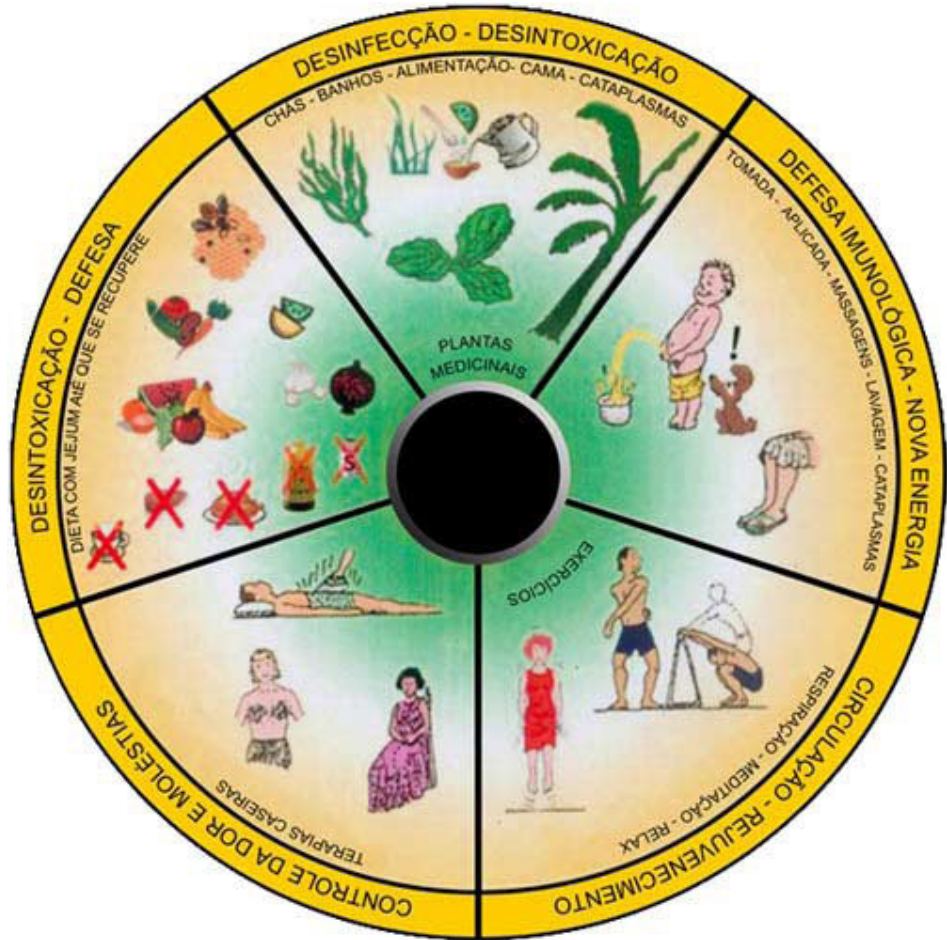


Figure 1:
BiosHealth Mandala
Source: ABRASP
course booklet.

promoted by ABRASP in Rondonópolis (Mato Grosso State), in mid-May 2015, the definition of fasting is not limited to the restriction of some foods or periods without food intake. It also includes eliminating the habits of watching TV, playing video games, surfing the Internet, and gossiping. This process of transforming one's habits is synthesized in a figure called the "BiosHealth Mandala" (Figure 1). The figure presents a circuit that includes five moments: 1) use of medicinal plants to complete the "detoxification" and promote a "disinfection"; 2) use of urine through intake, applications, massages, washes and poultices, which would increase immune defence and generate "new energy"; 3) working out; 4) "Home therapies" to control pain and illness and 5) diet with abstinence of coffee, meat, salt and an abundance of vegetables and fruits for "detoxification." Once again, the production of a "new man" is at stake through the transformation of his habits.

Nature is the source of healing in the practices promoted by Father Barth as well. ABRASP booklet states: "If nature heals everything, we don't need anything else." Barth suggests the use of "natural treatments only": medicinal plants, clay, natural

oils, and urine, which would be reserved for “more serious cases.” The three religious leaders denounce both the pharmaceutical industry and the system that produces medical experts and officials. They affirm that the doctors do not seek to cure but rather to increase their laboratories' profits. Zago⁷⁷ denounces: “Once the illness is cured, the rich source of money would be lost.” Wendling⁷⁸ adverts: “Remember: if medicines cured, we would not have sick people nor illnesses...”. In an interview to the reporter Canellas,⁷⁹ Barth prophesied the end of the pharmaceutical industry due to the advance of alternative medicines, suggesting that the industry is not interested in the elimination of the disease: “[Doctors] will have to look for another job, right? When there are no more sick people [their source of work ends]. The patient who keeps the pharmacy, the pharmacist, keeps the doctors, keeps the hospitals, and keeps medical universities.” Complementarily, the three religious leaders recommend the use of elements of nature, understood as created by God and therefore efficient. These elements include Zago's aloe, other “plants of God,”⁸⁰ and human body fluids such as urine. Following the rhythm of nature, considered a source of health, requires breaking with the manufactured, artificial, and industrialized products, seen as responsible for disconnecting the human animal from nature. “Gradually, I understood that I was ordained to defend weak and oppressed people, not the bottle and medicines,” declares Wendling,⁸¹ in statement that is a pun in Portuguese. The ABRASP website states: “The slavery in which people live is a tragedy: their whole life is tied to doctors or therapists and boxes of medicine.”⁸²

Moreover, these religious leaders also recommended the abandonment of foods that were “invented by man,” such as ham and canned food, which the ABRASP's booklet defines as biocides, i.e., “food that destroys life.” Zago suggests to his

77 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!*, 10.

78 Wendling, *A Vida Cura a Vida*, 33.

79 Canellas, “E Agora Uma Denúncia Grave de Curandeirismo.”

80 Wendling, *Cuidando Da Vida Com as Plantas de Deus*.

81 Wendling, *A Vida Cura a Vida*, 27.

82 ABRASP, “Biosaúde Brasil.” The three religious leaders are formed by the Catholic liberation theology and they are committed to empowering the poor, which can be noticed by Zago's preference for a “simple” and “poor” recipe, as well as by the fact that Wendling thinks his priesthood's reason is to defend oppressed people. The mention of slavery in ABRASP's website is also related to the Catholic liberation theology.



parishioners avoiding “refined factory-made products.” He argues that they can be more elegant, but also more “damaging for health”:

[...] the more elegant-looking, refined factory in use due to the more elegant-looking, refined factory-made products, often stocked on shelves in nice packaging, past their sell-by date, damaging for health, considered to be carcinogenic.⁸³

This critique engenders significant tensions. Often, however, the most conflictual part of these interactions is diminished by the ability of the Catholic Church to incorporate a disparate diversity of practices.⁸⁴ Therefore, it should not be a reason for surprise the fact that the Catholic Church enables the introjection of procedures, notions and practices.⁸⁵ The trajectory of the BiosHealth method spread by Father Barth points to this capacity of the Church to encompass diversity. The circulation of this method has crossed several distinct systems of thought. The method was created by the Japanese doctor, Yoshiaki Omura, who lives in the USA. According to the ABRASP website, Father Barth learned this method with the above-mentioned doctor Aton Inoue, in Nicaragua.⁸⁶

Zago’s relationship with medical diagnosis seems to be similar. As a critic of medicalization, the friar also undermines the relevance of this element of contemporary official medicine. The growth of the importance of diagnostic medicine has been highlighted by research, whether quantitative⁸⁷ or qualitative.⁸⁸ In some way, the friar reflects this process by recommending tests to verify if the disease has been overcome. In doing so, Zago incorporates concepts of health, disease, and cure. He includes among the elements that urged him to spread the formula of aloe the fact that he observed cures attested to by medical examinations:

83 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!*, 49.

84 Almeida, “Atos Dos Bons Samaritanos.”

85 Almeida; Giumbelli, “Espiritismo e Medicina.”

86 ABRASP, “Biosaúde Brasil.”

87 Leandro Ortigoza Martins, “O Segmento Da Medicina Diagnóstica No Brasil,” *Revista da Faculdade de Ciências Médicas de Sorocaba* 16, no. 3 (2014): 139–45.

88 Almeida, “Atos Dos Bons Samaritanos.”



I have had the joy of seeing tangible results with my own eyes, confirmed by the patients' families and, above all, by medical tests—definite solutions to the problem—considered a lost cause if ordinary procedures had been followed.⁸⁹

When incorporating conceptions, practices or procedures, Catholicism does not always simply introject them. In fact, sometimes Catholicism even subverts these practices.⁹⁰ By pointing out that medical diagnostic examinations demonstrate the efficacy of the aloe formula, Zago makes official medicine validate its method and even highlights the action of God, creator of aloe, in the world. The incorporation of the official medicine grammar is thus reversed as a sign of the power of God, which makes the distinction between alternative and complementary therapies more complex.

Another mechanism to accommodate this tension with the process of medicalization seems to be the so-called “inner healing,” a practice repeatedly offered by religious leaders in Catholic courses and retreats in contemporary Brazil, especially those linked to the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. This type of healing practice seems to define domains and relate the religious to the spiritual, mental, and psychological, leaving the human bodies and their materiality to academic and official medicine. The same approach is observed in the healing practices of the mediumistic religions in Brazil.⁹¹ Silveira⁹² states that actors linked to “inner healing” delegitimize other methods with arguments from official medicine:

The most institutionalized charismatic curators (linked to groups and communities) use traditional medicine to delegitimize therapies, opposing what they call “spiritual contamination” of healing practices linked to the New Age, Spiritism and Eastern religions (floral, regression to past lives, yoga and others).⁹³

To some extent, the practice of “inner healing” completes a possible panorama of healing practices of contemporary Brazilian Catholicism. It is not by chance that

89 Zago, *Câncer Tem Cura!*, 54.

90 Almeida, “Atos Dos Bons Samaritanos”; Giumbelli, “Espiritismo e Medicina.”

91 Giumbelli, “Espiritismo e Medicina.”

92 Silveira, “A Cura Interior No Catolicismo Carismático.”

93 Silveira, “A Cura Interior No Catolicismo Carismático,” 53.

its practitioners have a more daily experience of miracles.⁹⁴ On the contrary, Zago, Wendling and Barth dissociate themselves from the idea of miraculous cures. “When you understand the full potential of Aloe, you will understand that is not a miracle in the true sense of the word, but something found in the nature, created by God,” says Zago.⁹⁵ The practices of the three priests are based on actions that are oriented toward the material world. On the other hand, both their practices and their “inner healing” are based on the cultivation of the self, even if the consequences of their practices have taken different paths. This diversity of paths, either towards materiality or spirituality, underlines once again the porosity of the Catholic universe.

CONCLUSION

This article sought to analyze the healing practices of three Catholic leaders to draw an overview of Catholic healing practices in contemporary Brazil. The theoretical-methodological option of investigating members of the Catholic Church hierarchy was defined as a function of the growing importance of the institution in Brazilian Catholicism, and also as a way of promoting a certain symmetry, to use Latour’s term,⁹⁶ of the literature, which usually presents ethnographies and research on popular variations of Catholicism.

With this starting point, the analyses of the phytotherapy proposed by Zago, the holistic therapy designed by Wendling, and the BiosHealth method disseminated by Barth made it possible to perceive the crossing between environmentalization and healing practices of Catholic priests. In this way, health is identified as being in tune with “nature” and it is in the “natural” elements that cures for illnesses must be sought. As part of the encounter of a certain self-cultivation with the cultivation of the environment, which is recurrent in the world, and particularly in contemporary Brazil, therapies populated by environmentalization propose ascetic attitudes and concerns with the environmental question.⁹⁷ According to Zago, there is no point in using aloe grown in places where there is use of pesticides or taking the formula without changing your lifestyle.

94 Silveira, “A Cura Interior No Catolicismo Carismático.”

This link between self-cultivation with the cultivation of the environment within Catholicism promotes a unique updating of biblical culture that affects the lives of Catholic leaders and faithful. The New Testament narrative of the creation of a “new man” who dies to sin and is reborn with Christ, also resurfaces as the emergence of a subject concerned with the environment. According to Wendling, it is forbidden to speak of the God of Life while poisoning the garden around the chapel. This transformation entails changes in environmentalism promoted by Catholicism and vice versa. Environmental pollution gets close to the idea of sin⁹⁸ and nature becomes idyllic, a gift from God.

Medicalization is another element that characterizes healing practices of the three religious leaders here observed. The result of a long historical process, now consolidated in Brazil, implicates the medical organization in almost all healing practices.⁹⁹ Barth and his BiosHealth method felt more intensely the effects of the medical hegemony.

The doctors’ conceptions of health, illness, procedures, and examinations are accommodated by Catholic priests in the practices they promote. In fact, it is possible to verify a large exchange of notions and practices, which puts into question strict divisions of realities. However, incorporation often implies a subversion, making the distinction between complementary and alternative health practices more complex. This is what reveals Zago’s appreciation for medical examinations, which become witnesses to God’s action in the world.

Other healing practices of Brazilian Catholicism establish another relationship with official medicine. “Inner healing,” for example, proposes a separation between spiritual and material domains and restricts its work to spiritual, mental, and psychological spheres. Despite this attempt of separation, “inner healing” practices might end up blending spiritual and material domains, which could be addressed by future studies.

98 Recently, Pope Francis addressed this topic due to the Amazon Synod and suggested the idea of “ecological sin” “A Igreja Deve Confessar Os ‘Pecados Ecológicos.’ Sacerdotes Sejam Santos,” Vatican News, October 8, 2019, <https://www.vaticannews.va/pt/vaticano/news/2019-10/sinodo-amazonico-igreja-deve-condessar-pecados-ecologicos.html>.

99 Weber, “As Artes de Curar.”

I also highlighted that the “inner healing” and the environmentalization share the valorization of self-cultivation. The two practices show distinct developments of the same flow. This diversity seems to reinforce the porous character of Catholicism and its ability to bring together disparate conceptions and practices.¹⁰⁰ It should be noted that such inclusivity is not only observed when focusing on popular Catholicism, but also when investigating the practices of members of the Catholic hierarchy. This points to the existence of official variants of religion. Such a conclusion seems to ratify the importance of the Latour’s project of symmetrizing research in anthropology.

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"Wish" or prayer ribbons left in front of the Nossa Senhora Bonfim (Our Lady of a Good Death) church in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. Photos by Thomas M. Landy.