

**UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN BRAZIL: CASES IN DUAL  
ALLEGIANCE WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR ADVENTIST MISSION**

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ABSTRACT

The author seeks to describe the religious syncretism that exists in Brazil today, mostly within the context of popular Catholicism, charismatic Pentecostalism, and the Afro-Brazilian religions. The article shows the relations between syncretism and dual allegiance within the context of these Afro-Brazilian and Christian religions, and from that perspective it helps to set the context in regard to implications for Adventist mission. Through several case studies, it also seeks to demonstrate the challenges the Seventh-day Adventist Church faces as it encounters and deals with these realities.

RESUMO

O autor procura descrever o sincretismo religioso que existe hoje no Brasil, principalmente no contexto do Catolicismo popular, do Pentecostalismo carismático, e das religiões Afro-brasileiras. O artigo mostra as relações entre o sincretismo e dupla fidelidade no contexto destas religiões afro-brasileiras e cristãs e a partir desta perspectiva, ajuda a estabelecer o contexto em relação às implicações para a missão adventista. Através de vários estudos de casos, o artigo também procura demonstrar os desafios que a Igreja Adventista do Sétimo dia encontra ao se deparar e lidar com estas realidades.

INTRODUCTION

The African people who were sold to colonial Brazil brought with them their religious beliefs and traditions. In order to survive the inquisitorial atmosphere of the Portuguese colonizers, many of the African slaves needed to mask their deities and saints or ancestors with Roman Catholic names (Araujo 1988:297). This process gave birth to the Afro-Brazilian religions—a form of dual allegiance that

blends together various elements of Roman Catholicism, African Religions, and Kardecist spiritualism.<sup>1</sup>

Roman Catholicism and the animistic system of African religions brought to Brazil were the major forces to produce the unique syncretism<sup>2</sup> that is seen in popular Catholicism, charismatic Pentecostalism, and in the Afro-Brazilian religions today. Since spiritualism is an ideology followed by most practitioners of Catholicism in Brazil (Van Rheenen 1991:11), the Afro-Brazilian spiritualistic religions have been developed in order to accommodate the demands of such a popular religion. Afro-Brazilian religions are very practical indeed, and many appreciate that kind of religion because, “if one medium does not help, another is tried; if one spirit does not help, another is sought” (Van Rheenen 1991:160).

This unique religious syncretism permeates most aspects of everyday life, practices, traditions and beliefs, of a very large proportion

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper the words spiritualism or spiritualistic will be used instead of other accepted forms of the word like spiritism or spiritistic.

<sup>2</sup> I have used the term syncretism in association with the term dual allegiance; and although I have not provided a definition for both terms (see Bruce Bauer’s paper), I have attempted, however, to provide an explanation for syncretism. André Droogers says that syncretism is often and incompletely characterized with the observation that it brings or blends together elements from different religious sources. He argues that some scholars consider non-religious elements to be part of the process of blending, while others note that the mixing of elements happens in varying degrees. In this way they have distinguished different types of syncretism, with symbiosis at one end of the spectrum and complete fusion at the other. These two or more religious sources that provide elements for syncretization do not necessarily occupy an equal position. One source maybe dominant, coloring the elements taken from the other religion. Much syncretism seems to occur in an unreflective manner, as a natural—cultural process. As a consequence, people who mix varied religious elements may not do so intentionally and would not necessarily defend or propagate their blended religious practices. Thus, seen in this perspective, syncretism serves and is often used as a practical means of solving existential problems. If one religion disappoints as a problem-solver, the other religion and its representatives may offer compensation. And difficult situations may, therefore, stimulate people to appeal to different forms of syncretization (2005:465). Also, for a broader view, description and definitions of syncretism consult the article entitled: Syncretism, by Erich W. Baumgartner. 2006. In *Adventist Responses to Cross-Cultural Mission*, Vol. I, Bruce L. Bauer, ed., 205-218. Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission, Andrews University.

of the Brazilian population. Although it is difficult to assert numbers, today Afro-Brazilian religions, along with popular Catholicism and charismatic Pentecostalism, have become increasingly more popular in Brazil (Prandi 2000:642).

This paper seeks to describe the syncretism that exists in popular religions in Brazil. It shows the relations between syncretism and dual allegiance as seen in the cases of Afro-Brazilian and Christian religions, and from that perspective helps to set the context in regard to implications for Adventist mission. It also seeks to demonstrate the challenges the Seventh-day Adventist Church faces as it encounters and deals with these realities. No doubt that further studies will be needed, as these cases are not limited to Brazil.<sup>3</sup>

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Portuguese colonialism in Brazil lasted almost three centuries. The first settlers that arrived in Brazil built warehouses on the coast to trade with the Indians. There was a need for agricultural products in Europe, and for that the colonizers introduced sugar cane plantations. When these plantations were initiated, the Portuguese colonizers tried to turn the Brazilian Indians into slaves, but the Indians who were accustomed to a nomadic life style did not show any aptitude to work, especially for enslaved agricultural labor. When the natives did not fulfill the work expectations, the Portuguese gradually replaced them by the cheapest manual labor ever: the African slaves (Bastide 1978:31-33).

The big plantations had their own chapel as well as their own priest who was a representative of the church, an official of the Sunday mass, and a schoolmaster who would teach the sons of the Portuguese. The chaplains soon became responsible for the regression of Catholicism from a communal religion to a religion of family clans. It meant that the owners of the plantations were the owners of the religion as well as the owners of the priests. This caused Catholicism to suffer a serious

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<sup>3</sup> Although this paper describes mostly a Brazilian reality (past and present), its implications are also for the territory of the South American Division, as syncretism and dual allegiance is quite common there. Forms vary though, as these other countries inherited the syncretism of Amerindian practices, Spanish Catholicism, and various other mystical elements as well.

transformation: the invasion of the patriarchate into the church, and its repercussions reached far into the domain of symbols and values forming a Catholicism centered on the worship of the patriarch's guardian saints and of the family's dead. Worship service was highly animistic (the beliefs in personal spiritual beings) and had little doctrinal content (Bastide 1978: 40-46). Roman Catholicism gradually adapted itself to the interests and concerns of the Brazilian patriarchate, and certainly the Catholic faith lost its primary objectives when the owners of the land became the owners of the church too.

The slave trade that started about 1550 continued until around 1850. The grand total of Africans imported to Brazil was around 3,500,000. Portuguese South America received four main representations from the African continent: the Sudanese civilizations, represented especially by the Yoruba, by the *Dahomans*, by the *Fanti-Ashanti*, and by the smaller groups of *Krumano*, *Ani*, *Zema*, and *Timini*; the Islamized civilizations, represented by the *Peul*, *Mandingo*, *Hausa*, *Tape*, *Bornu*, and *Gurunsi*; the Bantu civilizations of the Angola-Congo group, represented by the *Abunda* of Angola, by the *Congo* or *Cabinda* from Zaire, and by the *Benguela*; and the Bantu civilizations of the east coast of Africa, represented by the *Mozambique* (*Macua* and *Angico*) (Bastide 1978:35, 46). Those imported to Brazil brought a variety of skills, customs, and traditions as well as religious and cultural backgrounds. Bastide commented that:

Africa sent to Brazil cattle raisers and farmers, forest people and savannah people, representatives of round-house and square-house civilizations, totemic civilizations, matrilineal and patrilineal civilizations, blacks familiar with vast kingships and others who knew only tribal organization, Islamized Negroes and 'animists,' Africans having polytheist religious systems and others who worshiped chiefly their lineal ancestors (Bastide 1978:46).

African religions were introduced to Brazil in this unique way. From different communities and religious backgrounds, the slaves were mixed aboard the ships and then, at the final trade centers they were bought and also sent to different places of Brazil. This created a big impact upon the new environment in which they were placed. It transformed their reality. For they were lost, they were weak, and they wanted to survive, so they found a way to maintain their religious

tradition: they masked their deities with Christian names—Roman Catholic ones.

Religious life in the slave communities was very difficult. The African slaves could not have their own religious services in a normal way. They were baptized into the Catholic faith without any regard of their will. There “they were obliged to camouflage their cults and saints with Christian names” (Araujo 1988:297), and so they gradually learned to adapt themselves to the new system. Van Rheenen commented that “although the slaves were forced to outwardly embrace Catholicism, the gods that they brought from Africa were intertwined with this new religion” (1991:255).

The slaves were used to a life of secrecy. In many places the slaveholders would not allow them to participate in religious activities. In some communities they were granted permission to attend church (Raboteau 1978:219), but it was a church especially designed for them. In a very precise way Bastide stated that “by permitting the blacks to unite in brotherhoods, the church promoted the syncretism of Catholicism with African religion rather than Catholicization of the blacks” (1978:56).

This scenario described changed drastically during the twentieth century in Brazil, with the emergence of many more forms of spirituality and religious life. In practical terms, religion has been more effective in the transformation of the Brazilian society than science (Sahr 2001:66). Moreover, many elements of Roman Catholicism, Evangelical and charismatic Pentecostalism, spiritualism, and African religions have blended together; and science, mysticism, parapsychology, and new age occultism have been added to these syncretistic neo-religions in an unprecedented way. The result is a dual allegiance within the context of a religious pluralism where the believer can seek for both God and the world of spirits at the same time.

#### AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS AND DUAL ALLEGIANCE

Most of the literature on religious syncretism in Brazil focuses on the interplay between Catholicism and African belief systems. Well known examples of such syncretism are *Candomblé*, *Macumba*, *Umbanda*, and *Quimbanda* (Nugent 1992:907). These and several

other Afro-Brazilian religions like *Batuque*, *Paguelança*, *Xangô* cult, *Catimbó*, *Tambor de Mina*, etc., are part of a vast array of religions where the issue of dual allegiance is part of life's reality. In this paper, only the three most relevant of them will be briefly presented: *Macumba*, *Candomblé*, and *Umbanda*.<sup>4</sup>

#### MACUMBA

*Macumba* is acknowledged as the oldest Afro-Brazilian religion, and it was probably the first Brazilian religious syncretism of two different systems: the Animistic system and the Catholic system. *Macumba* is defined as a syncretism between Amerindian, African religions, spiritualistic cults, and Catholicism (Bastide 1978:295). *Macumba* was the popular term for any Afro-Brazilian religion anywhere in Brazil; originally, the Afro-Brazilian sect was founded in Rio de Janeiro (Leacock 1972:378). Later on, the Afro-Brazilian syncretism known for centuries as *Macumba* or *baixo espiritismo* (lower-level spiritualism) was called *Candomblé* (Ortiz 1989:91).

*Macumba* is also associated with white magic (good spirits); however, *Quimbanda*, which is an extension of *Macumba*, is associated with black magic (bad spirits or spirits of the devil). The *Macumba* syncretistic religion can be good or bad, depending on the practitioner's own point of view or intentions. Some observers of *Macumba* rituals say that it depends how one sees the symbolism that is applied to the ritual. Moreover, *Macumba* can lead to social parasitism, to the shameless exploitation of the lower classes, or to the unleashing of immoral tendencies that may range from rape to murder (Bastide 1978:300). *Macumba* has become a more individualized rather than collective religion, although it still remains a religion of the group. It continues to grow and to provide a syncretistic religion to people of a culture that counts on its magical and mystical elements for survival.

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<sup>4</sup> Along with these Afro-Brazilian religions there are several others referred to as 'nations.' Examples are *Nagô* nation, *Efan* nation, *Angola* nation, *Ketu* nation, *Jeje-Mahin* nation, and *Mina-Jeje* nation. See Prandi, Reginaldo. 2000. African Gods in Contemporary Brazil. *International Sociology*, Vol. 15 (4):645.

*CANDOMBLÉ*

*Candomblé* is one of the most popular Afro-Brazilian practices, and it was “diffused from [the] Yoruba area of West Africa to Bahia, Brazil, via the slave trade” (Voeks 1990:118). *Candomblé* emerged in Brazil probably at the end of the seventeenth century as a syncretism between *Macumba*, African religions, and Roman Catholicism. Slaves were forced to adopt Catholicism, but they were not converted; they simply pretended to worship the most similar Catholic saints while worshipping their *orixas*, the generic name for Yoruba deities (Cole 1986:93). The special features of *Candomblé* are African music, dance, herbs, and the worship of the Yoruba-inspired religion.

Certainly, one of the best definitions of the *Candomblé* of Brazil is that of Renato Ortiz: “Candomblé is a celebration of the collective African memory on Brazilian soil” (1989:91). The functions of *Candomblé* as the religion of a cultural group are:

to promote the security of individual members through close solidarity in a mutual assistance group and through identification with the gods, to help satisfy personal desire for prestige and improved social status by linking the latter with religious status, and lastly to satisfy mass esthetic or recreational needs through music, singing, and dancing (Bastide 1978:221).

The religious services of *Candomblé* are carried out at holy houses, and the main focus of “worship is the maintenance of a harmonious relationship between religious followers and the African gods” (Voeks 1990:118). It is interesting to note that in this type of religion of dual allegiance, the gods and goddesses, the Yoruba orishas, are syncretized with Catholic saints, Jesus Christ and the Virgin. It is very common for the ritual practices of *Candomblé* to be accompanied by Catholic rites. For example, if on a particular night there is a ceremony to honour a certain orisha, in the morning the followers attend mass at the church of the saint that is syncretized with that orisha. Also, after the initiation ceremonies, it is common for the newly initiated person to undertake a pilgrimage to seven Catholic churches (Prandi 2000:647).

UMBANDA

This singular name is a combination of three different representations of religious structure: the priest, white magic, and an African form of spiritualism (Bastide 1978:480). *Umbanda* has been considered the biggest animistic religion in Brazil. In 1988 it was estimated to have a membership of twenty million adherents and was considered the leading religious group in Brazil if one measures beliefs in terms of actual behavior and practice (Van Rheenen 1991:255). Reginaldo Prandi has estimated that in São Paulo there are approximately 50,000 Afro-Brazilian worship centers among close to twenty million inhabitants (greater metropolitan area), of which 4,000 are *Candomblé* and the remaining are *Umbanda* (2000:644).

The roots of *Umbanda* are many, nevertheless this national religion is a syncretism of indigenous Indian elements, Catholic beliefs, *Candomblé*, various forms of spiritualism, *Macumba*, and Kardecist spiritualism (Pressel 1978:23, 27). *Umbanda* is called the most important popular religion in Brazil (Prandi 2000:642). Its two basic ideologies are: “a belief in the active intervention of spiritual entities in the lives of humankind, and the practice of spirit possession as the central means by which these entities communicate with and help or hinder humans” (Brown 1986:2).

In the pantheon of *Umbanda* there are two categories of spirits: the spirits of light and the spirits of darkness. The spirits of light are the *Caboclos* who are spirits of Brasil’s Indian ancestors, the *Pretos-Velhos* who are spirits of old slaves, and the *Crianças* who are spirits of deceased children and represent the idea of purity and innocence. The spirits of darkness are the *Exus*, and they are entities that work with the dangerous dimensions of night-time (Ortiz 1989: 95-98). The *Umbandista* universe of spirits and *orixas* is extensive, blending together more cultural traditions and religious background than any other religious movement in Brazil in the twentieth century.

According to *Umbandistas* there is an arrangement of seven sacred lines of saints, and there is a clear syncretism (similar to *Candomblé*) of various backgrounds between these lines: the line of *Oxalá* is associated with Jesus Christ, *Iemanjá* with the Virgin Mary, *Orient* with Saint John the Baptist, *Oxococe* with Saint Sebastian, *Xango* with



saint Jeronime, *Ogum* with Saint George, and the African line with Saint Ciprian (Pressel 1978:67).

*Umbanda* has been one of the fastest growing religions in Brazil (mostly during the last part of the twentieth century) and the reason is “because it overtly provides a context for the latent animistic beliefs long held by the majority of Catholics” (Van Rheenen 1991:74) as well as by adepts of other religious groups.

#### SYNCRETISM AND AFRO-CATHOLICISM IN BRAZIL

Afro-Catholicism is a syncretism of African religions, animism, and Roman Catholicism. It is a form of traditional Catholicism mixed with African religions that blends religious material and mysterious magic (Raboteau 1978:25). Afro-Catholicism is also referred to as Folk-Catholicism. It is divided into two main branches: Black Catholicism and Popular Catholicism.

#### *BLACK CATHOLICISM*

Black Catholicism was a lower class of Catholicism and existed side by side with the Catholicism of the white. It was the official religion of the slaves or black people who were free at the time of colonial Brazil. Black Catholicism was Roman Catholic with exterior forms and materials, but was African in its soul and beliefs. Black Catholicism was also greatly influenced by Portuguese Catholicism, which already had the custom of including masked dances and profane singing in religious activities (Bastide 1978:124).

Although Black Catholicism is different in many ways from Roman Catholicism, it resulted from a mixing of Christian beliefs and traditions with African animistic beliefs in a world of magic, mysticism, and spiritualistic rituals. In this context, African ceremonies were incorporated into Catholic ones. In doing so the Catholic Church permitted a form of dual allegiance or mystic religious syncretism. Bastide noted that “Black Catholicism was the precious reliquary, unwittingly presented to the Negroes by the church, in which they might preserve some of the highest values of their native religions, not as relics but as living realities” (1978:125).

*POPULAR CATHOLICISM*

Popular Catholicism also contains syncretism of various religious structures: Afro-Brazilian religions, folk religions, Animism, Catholicism, charismatic Pentecostalism, etc. Popular Catholicism in Brazil is characterized by the believer's act of exercising faith in the mystical element. Like *Umbanda*, popular Catholicism emphasizes the roles of spirits as patrons and of all humans as their clients (Brown 1986:193).

The adherents of popular Catholicism are allowed to do everything in the practice of their religion. Many of them go to the Catholic mass, but as soon as it is finished they engage in spiritualistic rituals that are similar to the Afro-Brazilian and charismatic cults. Their allegiance is not to only one particular denomination or deity, but to both a Christian church with its set of doctrines and beliefs and also to mystical spiritualism or the animism of Afro-Brazilian religions.

SYNCRETISM AND CASES IN DUAL ALLEGIANCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR  
ADVENTIST MISSION

Interestingly, during the past three to four decades, Afro-Brazilian religions, popular Catholicism, and charismatic Pentecostalism,<sup>5</sup> have

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Jenkins in his book *The Next Christendom* (see pages 63-66) provides the example of the Brazilian-based Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (*Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*). The Universal Church has grown phenomenally in the last two decades and some have estimated a membership in the millions (three to six). Even with a short existence, this Pentecostal Church controls one of the largest television station in Brazil, has its own political party, and owns a Rio de Janeiro football team (an asset that is valuable in terms of social and political influence [football in Brazil is considered by many as a religion of the masses, and as such competes with the allegiance that any believer might want to have with Jesus Christ, in fact it creates another kind of dual allegiance]). The Universal Church has also expanded its activities to more than 40 countries. It has been criticized for mystical and superstitious practices that exploit its largely uneducated members. The Church sells special anointing oil for healing, and television viewers are encouraged to place glasses of water near the television screen so they can be blessed by remote control and healed from diseases and curses. Change of angels ceremonies offer the option for believers to have another angel to solve their problems as their current one is too weak to help. Also, for a detailed description of charismatic and Pentecostal evangelicals in Brazil and their practices and beliefs, and how they have incorporated mystical elements into their religious activities, please see the chapter entitled: *O Culto Pentecostal e Carismático* (Pentecostal and Charismatic Worship), pages

been able to adapt to modernity by their rejection of the notions of sin and guilt and also by being the religions of the oppressed (Motta 1999:77) and the poor—which, not surprisingly, comprise the majority of the Brazilian population. Moreover, these religions are no longer ethnic religions exclusive to the black population or the poor, but universal religions, without racial, ethnic or geographical barriers. They are religions that congregate followers of all racial and social groups (Prandi 2000:641). This religious context provides both opportunities and challenges for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Brazil. Opportunities because “the process of de-catholicization in Brazil has been visibly growing faster (Motta 1999:77) during the last five decades, and that has allowed for more religious freedom for Adventist believers to preach the Three Angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6-12. But at the same time there are also many challenges due to the amount of syncretistic elements that have become part of these popular religions in Brazil. And unless there is true conversion (at the worldview<sup>6</sup> level) to Christ, a clear understanding of biblical truths, and a process of discipleship within the context of the remnant church and the soon coming of Christ, the new believer will continue to maintain allegiance to his former ways of life and syncretistic religion. Note the following real cases that are examples of the reality within our Adventist context:

*SERVING TWO MASTERS*

T. Medeiro lived in Belém de Maria (Pernambuco) and had been a member of the Adventist Church for a couple of years. Although he professed to believe in the Adventist truths as found in the Bible, he still maintained some amulets and continue to practice some rituals associated with his previous Afro-Brazilian spiritualist religion. During a worship service in his local Adventist Church, he was suddenly and mysteriously pushed up high and forward into the air, “flying” some three to four meters before he landed on the floor. He spoke in a lone

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73-141, in Vanderlei Dorneles, *Cristãos em Busca de Êxtase* [Christians in Search of Ecstasy], 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, São Paulo, Brazil: UNASPRESS. 2002.

<sup>6</sup> For a more comprehensive and in-depth study of worldview and implications for the Seventh-day Adventist, see Paulo Candido de Oliveira, “Developing an Interdisciplinary Analysis and Application of Worldview Concepts for Christian Mission.” DMin Dissertation, June 2006. Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University.

tow and distorted voice—it was someone else’s voice. The devil’s public manifestation indicated that there was a struggle—that allegiance to Christ and the Church or to the former religious practices and its spirits had to be defined and decided. Sadly, Medeiro had been serving and maintaining allegiance to two masters.

*DO NOT CONSULT THE SPIRITS*

H. Santos Barbosa became an Adventist in Teófilo Otoni (Minas Gerais). Her husband was already an Adventist at the time of her baptism. Few years after her baptism her brother became seriously sick (cancer) and was expected to die soon. While her husband went to visit her sick brother in another city, Barbosa stayed home with her children. Because she really wanted to know if her brother had died yet or not, and because she still continued to believe in the world of spirits and the rituals of her former religion, she decided to go to her room and wait for “an answer” about her brother’s condition. At night, a being (spirit) came to her while she was in bed and stayed at her side for a little while and then left. Barbosa was afraid as there was an eerie and spooky atmosphere in her room, but at the same time she wanted to understand the message this being/spirit was bringing her from her brother. After the spirit left, she stood up and went out of her room, called her children and told them that her brother had died. She told them that the being that came to her room was the spirit of her brother, who wanted to communicate to her that he had departed—died. In the early morning hours of that night her husband arrived, bringing the news that Barbosa’s brother had died.

*DELIVER US FROM EVIL*

F. Santos, the husband of H. Santos Barbosa, had been involved in *Macumba* before he became Adventist. He believed that Jesus Christ was more powerful than the spirits of *Macumba*. One day, after many nights without been able to sleep properly, he complained to the police about the noise caused by the *Matuqueiros* [those who beat the drums] of the *Macumba* center. Later, his former “brothers” from that center found out that he had complained and decided to do a *despacho* (spell or curse) against him and his family. They got a frog, stuffed its inside with some magical materials, sewed its mouth and placed the frog in

the doorsteps of Santos' house. Although Santos tried to be a faithful Christian, his wife still believed in the spirit's direct interference in one's life. Interestingly, that same week brother Santos had a terrible car accident. Fortunately though, he did not die, because God delivered him from evil.

*LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION*

Teenager R. Costa was very sick of his stomach having fever and other serious complications. He lived in a *favela* (slum) in Rio de Janeiro, a place quite distant from a decent hospital. His neighbors advised his father and mother to get a couple of fresh eggs from a certain "store" and rub them over his stomach and legs, moving them up and down. They believed that the eggs would attract and catch the evil spirits as well as any unclean element that was causing the sickness. If his parents would do that the boy would be healed, was the promise. Costa's Adventist parents, former members of an Afro-Brazilian sect, fell into temptation and decided to follow up with the recommendation, clinging to their former beliefs and practices.

*RISKY BUSINESS BUT IMMEDIATE RESULTS*

After receiving Bible studies, Elaine Reis became a member of a local Adventist church in São Paulo city. A couple of years later, while still in university she met the son of an Adventist minister, they dated, and later on they married. Things went well for a while, but as Elaine would go on vacations to her relatives, she reacquainted herself with her grandmother's *Macumba*. At first it was just a curiosity of reminiscing her past with grandmother. But as she returned more often for visits and shared some of her marital problems and life's struggles with grandmother, she believed that some of the "recipes" of *Macumba* could help her. She then started taking active part in the rituals and works of *Macumba*, not only interested in getting some help for her marriage and other problems, but also as a participant. Back home she would carry on with her responsibilities as usual, working, attending school, and going to church on Sabbaths with her husband. Unfortunately, as Elaine decided that *Macumba* was more appealing and provided immediate answers and help for her problems, the Adventist Church was no longer seen as necessary. Consequently and

sadly, she abandoned the church and the couple ended up divorcing.

I believe that the incidence of such cases in the Adventist Church in Brazil is still low, as compared to other protestant churches, but it is a reality. These cases do exist and for that matter the church must realize that this is a challenge that must be considered seriously.

Ministerial colleagues have told me that some of their Adventist relatives have resorted to various syncretistic practices in order to “help” someone get healed, to be able to find a job, to be protected, to find a spouse, to achieve success or material possessions, etc. The sad part is that these Adventists also bring their prayer requests to the church, while at the same time they try different *simpatias* (the use of certain rituals, songs, combination of words, amulets, etc.) in order to get what they are requesting or in need of.

Horoscopes and diviners are sought by church members and their advices followed in a disguised way so that other Adventists would not know what they are doing. Other times these members just place and keep a horseshoe or thorns (in its branch) by the door of their houses and such or other amulets have been used to ward off the evil spirits, to protect from calamities and diseases, or to help avoid bad things from happening. I have also heard from church members the expression “lets do a *saravá* or *simpatia* (magical spell) so that won’t happen to me/us,” or even worse, “I will do a *saravá* so my neighbor will get sick, or he/she will have a car accident, or that my boss will loose his job.”

The reason this happens so often in Brazil is because many people are experiencing Christian conversions without worldview change (Van Rheenen 1991:89). As such, these kinds of conversions without worldview change remain a major challenge for the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Brazil. When new believers experience genuine conversion in Christ, they leave the old religious practices with its dual allegiances behind and embrace the Adventist movement wholeheartedly as new persons in Christ. Their allegiances now and onwards are to Jesus Christ who through his death on the cross has triumphed over the forces of evil.

Allegiance to one God and his Church happens only when a person knows from where she comes from and who she is (history/identity), where she is right now (saved and in God’s church), and

where she is going to (purpose/prophetic perspective). Furthermore, new church members have to continually learn the biblical truths cognitively, but they must also be discipled at the worldview level—where decisions are made, and questions of allegiance decided.<sup>7</sup> This must be based on a clear understanding of the spiritual realities of life, in order for believers to fully grow in Christ and become mature and committed Adventist Christians.

#### CONCLUSION

Brazil is the world's largest Roman Catholic country. Close to 80% of the population, or some 155 million Brazilians “identify themselves as Catholics, though many, perhaps even a majority, also profess or practice Candomble and its variants” (Rohter 2000:A.3). Additionally, about 15% of the population claim to be evangelical Christians. This means that a large percentage of people who are being baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church today have had a syncretistic religious background. Consequently, popular Catholicism,

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<sup>7</sup> The Seventh-day Adventist church in Brasil has not been much affected by so many forms of syncretism and a life of dual allegiance in the past. This was due mainly because Adventists were the people of the book—the Bible, they were more isolated from community life and society in general, and were a relatively small protestant church, maintaining its American (and European) heritage. Also, pre-baptismal Bible studies were solid and preparation for church membership was a serious matter. The fact that our traditional theology was essentially anti-Catholic and anti-spiritualist somehow served as a wall against such syncretistic influences. Sadly though, the situation has changed. With the popularization of existentialism and less emphasis on serious doctrinal and Bible studies, suggesting that the person only needs to accept Jesus Christ to be baptized or to become a church member, the church has opened its doors for semi-converted Christians that are infiltrating syncretistic beliefs and practices in its midst (adapted from an e-mail letter from Alberto R. Timm to the author, March 29, 2007). Also, for further considerations, please see Alberto R. Timm, “Podemos ainda ser considerados o ‘povo da Bíblia’?” [Can we still be considered the people of the Bible?], *Revista Adventista* (Brasil) Junho de 2001:14-16; “Preparo para o batismo: assunto sério” [Preparation for baptism: serious matter], *Revista Adventista* (Brasil) Junho de 1997:8-10; see also, Paulo C. da Silva, *Série de estudos bíblicos da Igreja Adventista do Sétimo Dia no Brasil: breve história e análise comparativa do Seu conteúdo* (Bible Studies Series of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Brazil: Brief History and Comparative Analysis of Its Content), Engenheiro Coelho, SP, Brazil: Imprensa Universitaria Adventista, 2002.

charismatic Pentecostalism, and Afro-Brazilian religions with their many syncretistic religious practices and beliefs that promote dual allegiance do pose a major challenge to Adventist work in Brazil, for many church workers are not aware of these realities, have not had the training to deal with such syncretistic practices, or have ignored altogether the reality of dual allegiance within the Brazilian religious identity.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the challenges of post-modernist existentialism, secularism, materialism, and globalization—constant realities of the Brazilian society—confirm that in today’s world, “religion encompasses culture, the social encompasses the political, the invisible is in the visible, the profane contains the sacred” (Soares 2002:56), and vice-versa. Could that, combined with the appealing incentives and powers of mystical and syncretistic religions with its immediate rewards and benefits threaten even the identity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Brazil? I hope not. However, we need to be cognizant of the fact that “while the church is evangelizing the world, the world is secularizing the church” (Froom 1949:131).

Given the content of this paper and its implications, I believe it is imperative for the Seventh-day Adventist Church to urgently take advantage of the message contained in Fundamental Belief # 11 (Growing in Christ).<sup>9</sup> This biblical message must be unpacked, studied, preached, and explained so that all church members, laity and clergy alike, can understand that the victory of Jesus Christ and allegiance only to Him give us victory over all evil forces. Indeed, “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm” (Ephesians 6:12).

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<sup>8</sup> As an anthropologist, E. Abumanssur states that the Brazilian religious identity has developed to the contrary of the purification of religious beliefs, instead it has been produced precisely by the syncretism of different religions and cosmovisions. For many, syncretism is seen as something suspect, impure, and incorrect, but it is, however, precisely within this melting pot of cultures and religions that Brazilians were produced (2002:79).

<sup>9</sup> This fundamental belief is known by many as fundamental belief number 28; it is entitled Growing in Christ and in reality is fundamental belief number 11. It states: By His death on the cross Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil. He who subjugated the demonic spirits during His earthly ministry has broken their power and made



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certain their ultimate doom. Jesus' victory gives us victory over the evil forces that still seek to control us, as we walk with Him in peace, joy, and assurance of His love. Now the Holy Spirit dwells within us and empowers us. Continually committed to Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, we are set free from the burden of our past deeds. No longer do we live in the darkness, fear of evil powers, ignorance, and meaninglessness of our former way of life. In this new freedom in Jesus, we are called to grow into the likeness of His character, communing with Him daily in prayer, feeding on His Word, meditating on it and on His providence, singing His praises, gathering together for worship, and participating in the mission of the Church. As we give ourselves in loving service to those around us and in witnessing to His salvation, His constant presence with us through the Spirit transforms every moment and every task into a spiritual experience. (Ps 1:1, 2; 23:4; 77:11, 12; Col 1:13, 14; 2:6, 14, 15; Luke 10:17-20; Eph 5:19, 20; 6:12-18; 1 Thess 5:23; 2 Peter 2:9; 3:18; 2 Cor. 3:17, 18; Phil 3:7-14; 1 Thess 5:16-18; Matt 20:25-28; John 20:21; Gal 5:22-25; Rom 8:38, 39; 1 John 4:4; Heb 10:25.)

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