



# Artigos

## RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES AMONG BRAZILIAN MIGRANTS

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The migratory context may offer favorable conditions to intensify religiousness, even though there is no deterministic relation in it. In this paper, based on a research undertaken with Brazilians immigrants in South Florida, we analyze the multiple forms through which they live their religious experiences. For them, churches represent networks of self-support, social spaces, re-affirmation of national identity, as well as a collective expression of faith. However, despite the significant role of clerical participation, religious experience cannot be reduced to just that: it is also present in day-to-day life, as a “lived religion”, conditioning concrete ways of living; and, in extreme cases, it may even imply in full negation of institutional commitment, although faith is kept through other expressions.

**Keywords:** Religious experience; Migration; Brazilians in Florida; USA

*O contexto migratório pode oferecer condições favoráveis para intensificar a religiosidade, ainda que não exista uma relação determinante. Nesse texto, a partir de uma pesquisa com imigrantes brasileiros no sul da Flórida, analisamos as múltiplas formas através das quais eles vivem suas experiências religiosas. Para eles, as igrejas representam redes de auto-ajuda, espaços de sociabilidade, reafirmação da identidade nacional, assim como uma expressão coletiva de fé. Porém, mesmo com o expressivo papel da participação eclesial, a experiência religiosa não pode ser reduzida a isso: ela também se apresenta na vida cotidiana, como uma “religião vivida”, condicionando maneiras concretas de expressar a fé; em casos extremos, isso pode chegar a*

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*uma total negação do compromisso institucional, embora a fé se mantenha através de outras formas.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Experiência religiosa; Migração; Brasileiros na Flórida; EUA*

I had no one to appeal to: friends, family, security of being in my country. Well, I thought, now only with God I can count: I must grasp Him to be able to keep on. So, when I found myself alone in the ocean – just me, shipwrecked – He was my only life raft. (Catholic man, 2004).

The migratory process represents a break with the country of birth, implying radical changes and loss of references for the immigrant. In this context, for many, the religious dimension is seen as something that provides safety and stability. In Menjivar's point of view, "religion provides resources that nourish the immigrants' outlook and with which they can react to the confusion and alienation that result from their uprooting".<sup>1</sup> The role of religion, observed in several studies, is also pointed by Orsi's research of Italian immigrants in Harlem, which demonstrates its importance in "affirming ties to the homeland and maintaining the psychic and cosmic integrity of the immigrants".<sup>2</sup> Religious beliefs substitute other references that change or disappear, as a consequence of human mobility. In the words of an immigrant woman:

When one is migrant and is in a country which is not his own, I have the impression that the presence of God becomes stronger. One must have a point of support; life is distinct, culture is different, everything is different and one must have a reference. (Catholic woman, 2003)

In this sense, religious organizations are seen as a safe haven for the immigrants.

But we cannot claim a mechanical and deterministic relation. If, in some cases, the migratory status may accentuate religiousness as a form of cultural defense, in others it may also lead to a dissociation from any religious concerns, especially when the immigrant moves to a more secular context than the one he came from; he loses contacts and constraints and the net result is a process of secularization.<sup>3</sup> This tendency was also observed by Williams and Fortuny in their study with Mexicans and Guatemalans immigrants in Immokalee, Florida. They found that religion, although important, appears to be lived and practiced less intensively there than in

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<sup>1</sup> MENJIVAR, Cecília. "Latino Immigrants and their perceptions of religious institutions: cubans, salvadorans and guatemalans in Phoenix, Arizona", p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> ORSI, Robert. *The Madonna of 115 Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*, p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> FRESTON, Paul. *Becoming Brazuca: Brazilian Immigration to the US*, p. 3.

their communities of origin.<sup>4</sup> So, each case must be analyzed according to concrete realities that model the migratory process, in order to understand the relation between migration and religious experience.

Here, we understand religious experience in its large sense: it includes not only participation in religious communities, but also what some authors call “lived religion”. In Williams and Loreto de Mola’s words, this means:

the embodied beliefs and practices of individuals as they navigate the multiple locations and relations that constitute the fabric of everyday life. In this sense, religious life is just as likely to take place at home, at workplace or in the streets as well as in religious congregations.<sup>5</sup>

To analyze how religion is experienced in all these dimensions, we will take the case of Brazilians in South Florida, in the cities of Deerfield Beach and Pompano Beach. We begin the paper with a brief profile of the Brazilian community, based on fieldwork we undertook from 2001 to 2004 in Broward County, which included qualitative and quantitative methods.<sup>6</sup> Then, we identify the religious field in Florida and how it reproduces – or not – the country of origin situation. Thereafter, we analyze different forms in which religious experience takes place among Brazilians in Broward County. Finally, we conclude with some preliminary reflections on what this case has to tell us on the role of religion among immigrants from Latin America.

### **Brazilians in Broward County**

Accurate estimates of the Brazilian population in the US are hard to come by. The statistical problem is mainly due to two factors. The first of them is the irregular situation of migrants: it is estimated that 70% or 80% of all Brazilians in the US are undocumented. The second factor is ‘invisibility’: Brazilians fall through the cracks of official US ethnic classifications, not being ‘Hispanics’ and often not wanting to self-identify

<sup>4</sup> WILLIAMS, Philip J.; LORET DE MOLA, Patricia Fortuny. *Looking for Lived Religion in Immokalee, Florida*, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> We undertook participative observation in key congregations, interviewed the rank and file as well as leaders, collected oral histories of selected informants, and conducted focus groups organized according to religious affiliation, gender, and age. We also conducted a survey (N = 167). Due to limitations of time and resources as well as to the dispersal of the Brazilian population in Broward County, we could not do random sampling. Using the snow ball technique, we drew heavily from churches: 1/3 of the informants came from the Catholic Church; 1/3 from Protestant churches, and the rest from a small Spirit Center and from non-religious settings, which included malls, businesses like barbershops and hair salons, beaches, and an English language school. To avoid excessive bias, we did not survey more than 3 people derived from the same contact person, and we have tried to keep a certain balance between men and women.

themselves as 'Latinos'.<sup>7</sup> In Broward County, we faced this same constraint to establish the size of the Brazilian population. However, the figure of 25,000 to 30,000 immigrants is often quoted by community leaders and local newspapers.

It is a fairly recent migration. In our survey, 92% of our respondents indicated that they came to the region after 1990 and 41% after 2000. Drawing from the survey to give a quick profile of the Brazilian immigrant in Broward County, we found that 55% of respondents are between 20 to 39 years old and less than 3% are older than 60, indicating a fairly young population. Close to 60% of those surveyed are married, although the percentage of single men (36.5%) almost doubles that of single women (18.5%). Most Brazilians (90%) in the survey indicated that they are married to other Brazilians (although a little over 15% of Brazilian women indicated that they had married non-Brazilians). 69% of those surveyed stated that they have children, although the proportion of men who do not have children is higher than for women (40% vs. 24%). Of those who have children, 54% told us that they have two or more kids.

In terms of the place of origin in Brazil, as in the case of previous migration waves to Boston and New York,<sup>8</sup> the majority of Brazilians in Broward came from Minas Gerais (28.1%), followed by Rio de Janeiro (23.4%). Other states mentioned included São Paulo (11%), Goiás (8.4%), and Bahia (6%). Altogether 13 states of the federation (out of 26) were present in the survey, pointing towards a diversification of Brazilian migration to South Florida, a trend that was confirmed by informants during in-depth interviews. Surveyed Brazilians had a relatively high educational level. 85% had at least 8 years of formal education and close to 40% had more than 11 years (the equivalent to high school). As in Brazil, Brazilian women in Broward tend to have more formal education than men (close to 8% indicated that they have had 16 years of formal education while 1% of men did so). 68% of those surveyed identify themselves as white (*brancos*) and 25% as afro-descent (*pardos*), in accordance to IBGE ethnical classification. In Brazil, in contrast, a much larger percentage of the population is classified as *negros* or *pardos*.

Finally, in terms of labor dynamics, close to half of those surveyed work between 25 to 40 hours *per week*, but 47.5% work over 40 hours. Furthermore, 23% stated that they work 50 hours or more. 87% work all year around, without any vacations. Actually, busy schedules are one of the conditions that shape the life-style of Brazilians in Florida. There is a

<sup>7</sup> FRESTON, Paul. *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> On this topic see the works of MARGOLIS, Maxine. *Little Brazil: An Ethnography of Brazilians in New York City and of MARTES, Ana Cristina. Brasileiros nos Estados Unidos: um estudo sobre imigrantes em Massachusetts (Brazilians in the US: a study on immigrants in Massachusetts).*

sharp contrast between the type of occupation that our informants had in Brazil and the kind of work they do in Pompano and Deerfield Beach. Close to 40% of those surveyed had jobs in Brazil that required significant specialization (i.e., they were lawyers, medical doctors, dentists, technicians, administrators, or high school teachers). Only 29.4% were classified as unskilled workers. In Broward, the percentage of Brazilians in highly skilled occupations drops to 4%, while the percentage of unskilled workers balloons to 68.3%. Actually, Brazilians in the region are heavily concentrated in the construction sector, particularly in dry walling and roofing, as well as in the service sector, working as waiters, dishwashers, house cleaners, landscapers, and drivers. Despite this drastic downward occupational shift, Brazilians indicate that they earn far more money in Broward than in their homeland. The majority of the Brazilians interviewed (42%) earn between \$1,400 and \$2,000 per month (10 to 14 fold the minimum wage in Brazil which, at the time of the research, stood at \$140 a month). However, 18% earn only between \$720 and \$1,200, that is between \$8,640 and \$14,400 a year, roughly in the range of the U.S. minimum wage of \$10, 712 per year (poverty line for a family of four is \$18,400). On the other side of the range, 17% of those surveyed make \$36,000 or more *per year*, which falls within the middle class income range in the U.S. In other words, although most Brazilians in Broward can be categorized as unskilled workers, the group shows significant socio-economic heterogeneity.

This broad profile of the Brazilian population in Pompano and Deerfield Beach must be articulated to the urban cartography in which it is embedded, as the region's spatial distribution strongly conditions immigrants' status. In Broward County, Brazilians are spread out over a decentralized urban ecology delineated by an approximately 40-mile long corridor, extending from Boca Raton to Hollywood. In other words, Brazilians in Pompano and Deerfield face essentially an exurban landscape built around the logic of automobiles, with long and busy thoroughfares linking scattered large shopping malls and gated communities. This landscape stands in sharp contrast to hometown geographies in Brazil, which are usually built around heavily populated neighborhoods that mix residences, stores, and restaurants, normally anchored around public spaces like plazas, parks, and beaches. As befits the Sunshine state, even beaches that could serve as sharing spaces are deeply segregated, many of them in private hands.

Broward County's wide avenues often do not have sidewalks, forcing people to drive even to short distances. Moreover, public transportation is generally inadequate and inconvenient, compelling most Brazilians to own cars, despite the difficulty of obtaining and renewing driver's licenses for

undocumented immigrants.

This topography of Broward County is fairly different to that encountered by Brazilians in other regions of the United States – like Boston, New York or Newark – where they meet an urban context much more dense and greater facilities of public transportation.<sup>9</sup>

This geographical context places structural constraints to collective life. Besides, due to the fact that Brazilian migration to Florida is a relatively new process, civil associations practically do not exist. So Brazilians have to carve their own spaces of sociability, and here is where churches provide a crucial resource. Along with Brazilian businesses, particularly restaurants, grocery store, and hair shops, the so-called Brazilian churches – specifically founded to take care of migrants – offer one of the few meeting spaces and develop, in a measure, collective identity.

### **The religious field**

In the cities of Deerfield Beach and Pompano Beach, at the time of our field work, we identified 39 Brazilian churches, thus called as they were specifically founded to assist Brazilian immigrants, using their language and maintaining their culture. The first Brazilian churches founded were the protestant churches, followed immediately after by the Catholic Church.

The great majority of these churches (34) are Protestant churches of different sizes, ranging from storefront neo-Pentecostal churches to established congregations such as the Assemblies of God and the Baptists. There is only one Catholic Church facility: *Igreja Nossa Senhora Aparecida*. However, this is a large church that serves all Brazilian Catholics in Pompano Beach and Deerfield Beach. Moreover, it is part of an all-encompassing *mission* which includes four other churches in the region: Santa Catarina in Kendall (Miami), “*Igreja de San José*” in Miami Beach, Archbishop McCarty High School Chapel in Weston, and “*Nossa Senhora de Fátima*” Chapel in Hollywood. Finally, we also found three Spiritualist centers and an incipient “*terreiro de Candomblé*”.<sup>10</sup>

The distribution of these several churches, in the two cities, reproduces in a certain sense what is going on at the religious field in Brazil, where religious diversity is imposing itself. At national level, three principal trends may be observed, according to the official censuses:

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<sup>9</sup> For a more specific comparison, see VÁSQUEZ, Manuel A. and RIBEIRO, Lucia. “A Igreja é como a Casa da Minha Mãe: Religion and Lived Space among Brazilians in Broward County”.

<sup>10</sup> About Brazilian churches see RIBEIRO, Lucia and ALVES, José Cláudio. “Migração, Religião e Transnacionalismo: o caso dos brasileiros no Sul da Flórida”.

1) The decline of Catholicism. This is obviously a relative decline because it started from a position of monopoly as Catholicism was the official and traditional religion. But in the 2000 Census, the number of Catholics constituted 73.7% of the population, having lost 10 percentage points since the 1991 census;

2) The rise of Protestantism. The Protestants represent today 15.5% at the national level. And, among them, more than two thirds are Pentecostals;

3) The rise of a category known as “without religion”, which covers a multitude of unorthodox individualistic spiritualities as well as agnostics and atheists. Those who declare themselves “without religion”, even if they represent only a minority (7.3%) are the ones who proportionally have had the greatest increase.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of Broward County, these trends seem to become more acute: the number of Protestants not only increases, but it seems to be higher than the number of Catholics; and Pentecostals are growing, not only among Protestants, but also inside the Catholic Church, in which the Catholic Charismatic Renewal is very influential. This hypothesis, resulting from our data, would need to be confirmed by more accurate research.<sup>12</sup> But it coincides with what was observed by Paul Freston who, analyzing experiences of Brazilian migration in other regions, observes three major changes: first of all, a greater Christianization as other currents are greatly reduced in organized way or even virtually absent. The second change is a greater Protestantization of Christians, in which Protestant churches seem to occupy a greater space than they do in Brazil. And thirdly, a greater pentecostalizing of Protestants. Pentecostals are already two-thirds of Protestants within Brazil; but in the diaspora that percentage seems to grow even more. Freston also observes that this later change occurs also inside the Catholic world.<sup>13</sup>

### **Participation in religious communities**

Facing this religious trend in Broward County, immigrants experience their faith in several ways. Participation in religious communities constitutes the way of living it at a collective level. According to Maduro, “religious organizations represent for many immigrants the first and only

<sup>11</sup> See PIERUCCI, Antonio Flavio. “Bye, bye, Brazil – O declínio das religiões tradicionais no Censo 2000”, and JACOBI, César Romero (et al.). *Atlas da filiação religiosa e indicadores sociais no Brasil*.

<sup>12</sup> Actually, our study do not allow a precise comparison with the Census data, as the later are based on self-identification, while our data are based on the number of churches, and on estimates on the number of migrants that attend them.

<sup>13</sup> FRESTON, Paul. *op. cit.*, p. 4.

hope for community, after having abandoned or lost the one they had in their country of origin".<sup>14</sup> In addition to its specific religious characteristic, religious institutions also fulfill many other functions at the social, economic, assistance, and cultural levels.<sup>15</sup> It is what Paul Freston considers as "expansion" of the organized religion, *vis-a-vis* the relative lack of other state and civil society institutions amongst the immigrants.

These functions are described, here, through immigrants' words, as they express their motivations to participate in churches.<sup>16</sup>

The explicitly religious motivation is present, and may be expressed through the search for a meeting with God and spiritual guidance for daily life. "I go to Church in search of what God has for me because, there, God will give me guidance so I can direct my life" (Protestant woman, 2003).

Churches play also a social function: migrants find there an emotional and affective support. A Protestant pastor clearly sees this dimension: "When the church opens itself to offer work and solidarity, and the person feels itself well received, then that person goes to church. Not only for the spiritual side, but mainly by the need of interaction, of communion, of not feeling alone" (Protestant Pastor, 2002).

This need is particularly felt by those who migrate alone, without their families, and it is expressed as follows: "Those who don't have families here have the church, which is our family. Here, our friends here are our relatives. They are the ones on whom we can rely on" (Protestants focal group, 2004).

This feeling of church as a great family is also evident among Catholics. Angela, a member of Nossa Senhora Aparecida's mission, told us: "church is like my mother's house, a safe port, a place where you go to get support".

Another reason for community participation is seeing it as a place of assistance and help, where resources are provided, ranging from contacts and information to material aid.

We help a lot of people that we don't know, people that we heard about. Here in the church especially. One gives messages: "ah, so and so needs a house or a job, or suffered an accident, or maybe is having financial difficulties." And thus, everybody helps everybody. (Catholics Focus Group, 2004)

This dimension of service can be experienced by both sides: those who receive and those who provide service. Among these last ones, there

<sup>14</sup> MADURO, Otto. *Notas sobre pentecostalismo y poder entre inmigrantes latinoamericanos en la ciudad de Newark*, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> VÁSQUEZ, Manuel A. and RIBEIRO, Lucia. *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> RIBEIRO, Lucia. "A experiência religiosa no processo migratório", p. 11.



are also immigrants – who are already in a more stable situation – and who feel themselves happy to be useful to others: “I feel privileged to be in a position to help other people. I can help those in need, because I think that one has to feel useful” (Catholic woman, 2003).

In religious environments, solidarity is considered to be a “sacred obligation”.<sup>17</sup> It acquires a double value in migratory context, as its absence, in foreign country hostile environment, is deeply felt.

These findings echoes with Martes’ research among Brazilians living south of Boston; who consider churches a “safe space for sociability”, and she elaborates: “churches welcoming environment contrasts to the situation experienced ‘out there,’ which is perceived as competitive and with low solidarity and community spirit”.<sup>18</sup>

Immigrants also seek in religious communities – in some cases, above all – a Brazilian space: they participate much more when the cult is held in Portuguese.

“Even the way of preaching the Gospel is different in Portuguese” (Focus Group of Protestants, 2004).

In fact, it is not just a question of language. To share the same cultural identity means, for immigrants, to mark their religious practice with a particular “style”.<sup>19</sup> But more than that, a deeper question is included here: the nature of religious practice requires to be anchored in the person’s own culture and language. This is what a Brazilian bishop expressed, D. Edgar Cunha,<sup>20</sup> as he told us: “a Brazilian has the right to pray in Portuguese”.

Finally, participation in a religious community may also involve discovering that it bears a “sacred mission”. Maduro, who works with the Latin Pentecostal churches, in Newark, notes that “they perform important work in promoting and nourishing in migrants a feeling of being receivers, bearers and providers of a mission that is the highest and most important of all: that of showing the true path to eternal salvation.” On becoming aware of this mission, the migrant ceases to feel as a “foreigner”, an “illegal”, to become a person chosen and protected by God.<sup>21</sup>

We found this same perception among immigrants in Broward County. A Catholic woman expresses herself as follows: “Because we are here, something, some seed has to start to develop here. I believe there’s a higher reason for me being here, also at religious level” (Catholic woman,

<sup>17</sup> MADURO, Otto. *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> MARTES, Cristina. *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> RIBEIRO, Lucia. “Práticas religiosas: sua importância no cotidiano do migrante”, p. 263.

<sup>20</sup> D. Edgar Cunha is the first Brazilian bishop working with the North American Conference of Bishops; currently, he is responsible of the dioceses of Newark, N.J.

<sup>21</sup> MADURO, Otto. *op. cit.*, p. 9.

2003).

Through this perception of a “sacred mission”, migrants construct religious narratives that give a meaning to their presence in the USA.

### **Lived religion**

Despite the significant role of church participation, religious experience cannot be reduced to it. According to Orsi’s point of view, we consider religion not only as “a medium for explaining, understanding and modeling reality”, but more specifically as a “lived religion” which “comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life”.<sup>22</sup>

In this sense, it permeates all phases of the migratory process. For those who already had a religious practice in Brazil, its influence may be felt from the very beginning, at the moment of taking the decision to migrate. This is more evident in the case of religious leaders, but it may be observed also among common believers.

Angela’s case<sup>23</sup> may illustrate this point. Married, with two children, she worked as a psychologist in Brazil when her husband, who was an executive, decided to go to the USA. For her, it was very difficult to accept this decision. She prayed a lot, saying to God: “I will place myself in your hands. I will not live in the USA if it is just my husband’s plan. I will go only if I feel it is Your plan, and if I have something very important to do there. And you must give me a proof of it (Catholic woman, 2002).

This case is significant, as Angela explicitly states the importance of the religious factor in her decision-making process, and she elaborates a religious narrative to give a meaning to her migratory process. When she puts in the hands of God not only her decision to migrate but also all the other decisions she must take – like finding a house and choosing school for her children – Angela feels supported herself. In addition, she discovers signs – like a crucifix and an image of the Virgin Mary that she found at her future house – that were interpreted as a confirmation of the rightness of her choice: “Didn’t I ask Him to give me a sign? He says to me: ‘You came because I need you, you came to serve me.’ And that is why I said I came by the will of God” (Catholic woman, 2003).

In her perception, divine will is expressed through concrete signs.

This example illustrates the influence that religious factor may have in the decision to migrate. On the other hand, we cannot forget the existence of religious networks that, even if they do not directly determine this decision, at least may offer more favorable conditions to accomplish it.

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<sup>22</sup> ORSI, Robert. “Everyday Miracles: The Study of lived Religion”, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> The names of the interviewees are fictitious, to preserve their anonymity.

In the daily life of migrants, the religious dimension is lived in quite diverse ways. Perhaps the most elementary aspect – and certainly the most generalized, including those who do not have an explicit religious option – is praying to God at a difficult moment, when no other alternative is left. This is confirmed by the survey, undertaken during the research in Deerfield and Pompano Beaches: the expressive majority of the interviewees – 92, 2% – declared to have a regular practice of prayer.

Lived religion in day-to-day life may also include the conscience of being the object of divine protection at every moment. A concrete example is related by Angela who, facing the threat of a hurricane, prayed a lot, asking for protection of God. Suddenly, she felt as hearing: “No wind will reach your window”. Actually, the hurricane passed farther away and did not reach her home. In Angela’s perception, it was a sensible sign of the divine presence close to her.

Lived religion is also expressed in different ways of living and acting, in the parameters of daily life, particularly in its professional aspect. A Spiritualist man brings forth the following testimony:

Logically, religion helps in everything. When you participate in a religion, you understand the ideas, (you get) a higher moral, you become a more balanced person. It strengthens yourself, and you begin to desire to contribute, not only in your neighborhood, but at your own professional work. (Spiritualist man, 2002)

This influence is felt, in a deeper way, when the person discovers that meeting God demands a complete change, with tangible consequences in concrete life. In Angela’s words: “If you really live (your Faith), not just by going to Mass when you want to go, but if you assume it as an integral part of your life, you live it in another way, you live integrally all of its forms”(Catholic woman, 2003).

Another testimony on this daily experience of faith points to a surprising and unexpected consequence, in the context of a consumer’s society: “I learned to live with less things here – in the country of consumption, imagine! – I learned to disconnect myself from material things. Today, it makes no sense to have things that before were important to me” (Catholic man, 2004).

This learning of detachment seems to be, at the same time, a consequence and a condition for spiritual growth, implying a personal and permanent effort. Its importance is also felt from a different viewpoint, that of a Spiritualist, who says:

There is no more a border in my heart. The important is what I feel in this moment, in my daily life, if I am in peace with myself. This detachment of

things and persons is a unique experience: I don't feel tied to anything; I don't feel I owe anybody anything, and I live my existence fully. And I only can explain it by the practice of Spiritualism, because I am living this spiritual life intensely, not just with myself but with all the others. (Spiritualist man, 2002)

This religious experience as personal living permeates the whole life and, therefore, is not reduced to – neither does it necessary demand – participation in a religious community. In extreme cases, it may even be completely separated from organized religion.

### **“Believing without belonging”**

This is another way of entailing with the sacred, independently of religious institutions. The lack of a compromise is due to the fact that persons do not find satisfaction with the teachings of any church, even if they believe in the existence of God. This process of “deinstitutionalization” has been occurring in Brazil, as in other places of the world, and expresses itself in an increasing adhesion to forms of religiosity that do not necessarily imply belonging to a church institutionally organized or the acceptance of a doctrine.<sup>24</sup> Actually, at national level, we may observe a multiplication of “religious persons without religion”, who, in the words of Novaes, “look for symbols and beliefs at different spaces and spiritual traditions, to weave their personal religious synthesis”.<sup>25</sup>

We found this process of “believing without belonging” reproduced in the diasporas context, in Broward County. It may be illustrated by the experience of a Brazilian migrant, Antonia. Psychologist, she worked in Brazil in her profession, but the low salary she received motivated her to move to the US. Working there in a Brazilian snack bar, Antonia usually meets Brazilian migrants, some of them Catholics, but in their majority protestants; being very critical of their behavior, she tries to avoid their attempts to convert her:

I don't like any religion here. I find that the protestant believers are extremely hypocrites; because they say: “Jesus gave me a car”. But if you don't work Jesus gives nothing to nobody - excuse me. I believe very much in God... in Jesus. But I think, it is work that builds everything. Then, some persons arrive here saying: “Hello, brother, the peace of the Lord” and then they sit down and begin to speak badly of the others. Do you think this is religion? (“Independent” woman, 2004)

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<sup>24</sup> TEIXEIRA, Faustino and MENEZES, Renata (orgs.). *As religiões no Brasil – Continuidades e rupturas* – Introdução, p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> NOVAES, Regina. “Pentecostalismo, política, mídia e favela”, p. 43.

This critical vision of organized religion does not hinder that Antonia may experience a dimension of faith, in her way. With a catholic origin, she qualifies herself as a Bahian Catholic *católica baiana*.<sup>26</sup> This qualification indicates the acceptance of a syncretism in religiousness that mixes catholic faith with Afro-Brazilian rituals. In the USA, even considering the Catholic Church “a very complicated thing”, Antonia sporadically goes to it: “I go to church once a year or when I want to. I do not want any commitment”, she says. Reacting against the institutionalization of belief, she refuses to “belong” to any church. But despite this, she keeps her faith in her way.

### Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to show the multiple ways in which Brazilians immigrants live their religious experiences in South Florida. The religiousness that we found there reproduces – and, in a certain sense, it even gets sharper – the trends that characterize Brazilian religiousness, which points toward increase in Protestantism – particularly Pentecostalism – but also among the minority of those “without religion”.

In this context, our research shows how the migratory process offer favorable conditions to intensify religiousness in its multiple forms, be it through participation in organized religion or through different religious expressions that permeate daily life. Churches represent for immigrants the possibility of creating networks of self-support, as well as spaces of sociability, re-affirmation of their national identity, and – perhaps more importantly – of intimacy and self-centering.

But we observed also the difficulties to keep an institutional participation, due to geographical dispersion and busyness of people’s lives, as the average immigrant works very long hours.<sup>27</sup> More than that, we found, among some immigrants, a process of “deinstitutionalization” – that also has been occurring in Brazil – and which does not mean necessarily a loss of faith: though being very critical of organized religion and refusing an institutional commitment, immigrants keep their faith in their own ways, “believing without belonging”.

Besides, we must be careful not to romanticize the role of churches. Like any other social institution, they respond in contradictory ways to a spatial-temporal context. Specially in the case of some Protestant churches among Brazilians in Broward County, we observed an intersection of business and religious networks which makes churches susceptible to

<sup>26</sup> Literally, this means a catholic from the state of Bahia, which is known by the strong influence of Afro-Brazilian religions and a growing syncretism of catholic beliefs.

<sup>27</sup> FRESTON, Paul. *op. cit.*, p. 5.

the commoditization of social relations and economic exploitation, often legitimated by a gospel of health and wealth.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, it is true that, actually, churches only reach a small portion of the Brazilian population in the region. Even if we consider religious experience as a larger phenomenon, which may be experienced outside or even without any links to institutional organizations, it only attains a minority. But we may hypothesize, following the thought of Manuel Vásquez that

Religion may be one of the crucial resources by which immigrants carve meaningful living spaces in the crevices of a society that is increasingly criminalizing them, representing them as “illegal aliens” and “lawbreakers.” Put in other words, in this post-9/11 climate of resurgent nationalism, religion might be helping immigrants to negotiate the tension between visibility and invisibility; i.e., making them visible to each other in protective interpersonal spaces at a time when their survival and well-being is more and more predicated by their invisibility to the larger society.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> For further details on this topic, see VÁSQUEZ, Manuel A. and RIBEIRO, Lucia. *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> VÁSQUEZ, Manuel A. and RIBEIRO, Lucia. *op. cit.*, p. 12.

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