

Poverty and Fear Make Brazil a Land of Many Faiths

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Believers in Brazil can choose from a wide variety of religions. The main reason for this rich selection lies in the country's colonial history and its current socio-economic development.

This is the key message of a project recently concluded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) in order to analyze why Brazil of all countries experiences such a big run on faith.

Millions of Europeans were under the spell of the elections for the new Pope, but the truth is that religions are losing their importance in Europe.

By taking the example of Brazil, Prof. Franz Höllinger of the Institute of Sociology at the University of Graz has now discovered why things are different in other regions of the world.

Colonial Catholicism

Prof. Höllinger was able to identify one decisive reason for the current religious vitality in Brazil: today's multi-cultural society, which began developing in the country's colonial period.

Prof. Höllinger explains: "Extremely varying cultures and religions from three different continents clashed in Brazil during the colonial period. To begin with, South America's original inhabitants were subjugated by the Portuguese colonial masters who then also imported African slaves.

"It is true that the entire population was converted to Catholicism due to the concentration of Portuguese power, but it was very difficult to effectively supervise religion so far from the homeland."

In 1890, the number of church representatives per capita was still only one per 4,000 inhabitants. In comparison, this proportion was eight times higher in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy during the same period.

As a result, the influence of the Catholic Church on standards of religious behaviour was quite limited. This gap was filled by charismatic laymen to whom the community attributed special spiritual and magic abilities.

Consequently, Christianization remained only at a superficial level, while locals continued to practice traditional magical-spiritualistic rites and customs.

Pick 'n Mix

Nowadays, since the state-church monopoly of the Catholic Church was eliminated in the course of democratization, these traditional forms of popular spiritualist religiosity can be practised freely once again.

As a result, many different religious trends exist side by side: spiritualist communities, Afro-Brazilian cults, Pentecost churches, Catholic base communities, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement as well as many esoteric groups.

Regarding this extensive offer, Prof. Höllinger explains: "But this wide offer is only one reason why religions are en vogue in Brazil. Religions are subject to the market law of supply and demand.

"Therefore, for a flourishing religious market you need the corresponding demand. As a result of the socio-economic development, this demand is very big in Brazil."

In this context, it can be observed that the general phenomenon of poverty promoting faith is only partially responsible for the big interest in religion in Brazil.

The middle classes are also busy following religious rituals: 69% pray every day, 34% attend mass every week. These figures differ only slightly from the figures on the lower social classes.

According to Prof. Höllinger, this can be explained in the following manner: in a state with extreme social inequality and precarious living conditions amongst a great part of the social stratum (which consequently leads to one of the highest crime rates of the world), poor and rich alike have to constantly worry about their safety. Here faith offers a possibility to deal with fears and concerns.

Thanks to Prof. Höllinger's analysis, the connections between such current developments and the historical heritage can explain the current blooming of religiosity in Brazil for the first time.

With this, the project supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) can also provide new ways of thinking for European churches jeopardized by a continuing decrease in popularity.

Austrian Science Fund - www.fwf.ac.at/en