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Afro-Brazilian religions and religious diversity: contributions to pluralism

Marciano Adilio Spica 

Department of Philosophy, Universidade Estadual do Centro-Oeste, Guarapuava, PR, Brazil
Email: mspica@unicentro.br

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Abstract

My objective is to explore a possible contribution of Afro-Brazilian religions to a pluralist philosophy of religious diversity. I will especially explore the syncretic wisdom of these religious traditions, showing how it can help us better understand interreligious dynamics. To do this, I begin by exposing some challenges of pluralist theses, highlighting two problems: homogenization and isolationism. Following that, I briefly introduce some characteristics of Afro-Brazilian religiosity, emphasizing its syncretic aspects, and then argue in favour of syncretism as a kind of wisdom intrinsic to Afro-Brazilian religiosity. This wisdom encompasses both practical and conceptual aspects. I conclude by demonstrating how this Afro-Brazilian wisdom can contribute with philosophical studies on religious diversity.

Keywords: Afro-Brazilian religions; syncretism; wisdom; pluralism

Introduction

There has been a significant philosophical production concerning religious diversity in recent decades. This production is generally divided into three major approaches, first coined by Alan Race (1983): exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Exclusivism is the position that, in the face of religious diversity, argues that there is one religion superior to others in the sense that only a specific religion is true. Furthermore, the exclusivist maintains that the religious believer is justified in believing in one religion as superior to others. In contrast, inclusivism argues that one religion is superior to others regarding truth and salvation, but certain truths can be found in fragmented and incomplete forms within other religions. Finally, pluralism, in various ways, contends that it is possible to assert that a plurality of religions is logically and epistemologically legitimate, and their messages can be true, with no means of declaring one superior to another. My concern here will be to concentrate solely on pluralism.

I aim to present possible contributions from Afro-Brazilian religiosity to pluralism as a philosophical stance in the face of religious diversity. I intend to argue that some characteristics and concepts present in Afro-Brazilian religiosity can contribute with a differentiated pluralistic perspective compared to traditional approaches. To achieve my objectives, I begin by drawing attention to two problems that I believe are present in some pluralistic approaches: homogenization or reductionism and isolationism. After that, I present some characteristics and concepts of Afro-Brazilian religiosity, with a

focus on the culture of syncretism. Finally, I offer some contributions that these ideas from Afro-Brazilian religiosity could bring to a pluralistic position regarding religious diversity.

From exclusivism criticism to radical pluralism: notes on insufficiencies

In his article 'The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions', Gavin D'Costa (1996) argues that the pluralist view of religious diversity is ultimately unsustainable because, in the final analysis, it is also a form of exclusivism. By examining some pluralist theories, especially those of John Hick and Paul Knitter, D'Costa (1996) concludes that 'pluralism must always logically be a form of exclusivism and that nothing called pluralism really exists' (225). This is because, according to D'Costa, every pluralist upholds some form of truth criterion, and consequently, that which does not meet this criterion does not count as truth. This would be necessary because, without this criterion, there would be no way to distinguish what is true from what is false in religious terms. In this sense, the pluralist operates within an exclusivist framework despite not intending to do so.

A good example of this logic, to D'Costa, would be the kind of pluralism advocated by John Hick. Hick justifies religious diversity, starting from the distinction, borrowed from Kant, between phenomenal reality and noumenal reality. For Kant, the only knowable thing is phenomenal reality. We cannot know or have access to the thing itself or noumenal reality. Hick applies this distinction to plurality in religious beliefs, separating the Real¹ (equivalent to the noumenal) and the various ways in which the Real has been thought of or experienced in different religious contexts (equivalent to the phenomenal world). This distinction is only possible because religious manifestations are not merely human projections but involve a response to a transcendent reality. That is, all the world's great religions utilize the idea of transcendence and, more than that, agree that describing such a transcendent reality is impossible (Hick 2004). In this sense, for Hick, the wide variety of religions in the world is caused by their attempts to describe the ultimate reality understood as the Real. The Real is something that no religion can access, or better, no religion can say that it has a complete description of because it is transcategorical; it is beyond the categories of our understanding, and any attempt to describe it always fails because the forms of our understanding limit our ability to know it, making it inaccessible.²

For Hick, the variety of religions in the world arises from their attempts to describe ultimate reality, understood as the Real or Transcategorical. The Real itself is something that no religion can access. What they possess are merely attempts to describe the Real, and since no religion can have direct access to the Real itself, Hick argues that neither exclusivism nor inclusivism makes sense. Both would require privileged access to the Real or a description of the Real itself. However, given the Kantian distinction between the noumenal Real and the phenomenal real and Hick's adaptation of these ideas, combined with sociological and linguistic aspects (Twiss 1999), such access or description is impossible for any human being. Given that no religion can claim full access to the Real, none of them has complete and definitive truth about it. One cannot dismiss any interpretation of it as false, as that would require a proper understanding of the Real. Therefore, all interpretations are legitimate; thus, pluralism is justified and should be respected.

However, a thesis like this, on its own, would have problems differentiating what can and cannot be considered an authentic interpretation of the Real. In other words, the fact that religions are merely unconfirmed hypotheses about the Real would open the possibility that anything could be said about the Real, leading to absurdities from the perspective of religious language and an inability to define what properly counts as religion and what does not. To address this problem, Hick resorts to soteriology and argues that the

differentiation between an authentic (religious) and inauthentic (non-religious) interpretation of the Real is based on a moral criterion. That is, for him, an authentic interpretation of the Real is one that promotes a shift from self-centredness to a centrality of the self about the Real. In practical terms, the authentic religious interpretation is one that promotes a particular set of ethical values, a change in the believer's way of life. Here, we have a criterion that distinguishes what is religious from what is not. D'Costa will argue that this is one way of operating within an exclusivist logic, as it defines what is and is not a religion and positions itself in some way regarding what is genuinely religious. Hick's (1997) response³ to this issue asserts that this criterion is not exclusivist but rather a criterion taught in all major world religions. This answer seems insufficient because it is focused on the major world religions, which could be considered a restrictive idea of religion since they are not considering other religions. This is the basis of criticisms on Hick's theory from pluralist authors.

Several pluralist authors criticize Hick's thesis because it has a narrow perspective of religion. In other words, he focuses only on major world religions, disregarding important manifestations that do not belong to the so-called post-axial religions (Spica 2018a; Burley 2020). In addition to being narrow, Hick's theory is also criticized as homogenizing (Harrison 2006; Burley 2020). Essentially, this critique argues that Hick's theory, with its Kantian and soteriological assumptions, has an approach to religions that is limited to only a few major world religions, neglecting or being incapable of addressing other significant religious expressions, such as Afro-Brazilian religions, which I will discuss later. This limitation is because Hick only considers the religions that he calls post-axial and restricts religion to the soteriological criterion (Burley 2020). We do not have space to delve into the details of these critiques here. However, it is important to note that they bear a resemblance to the exclusivist critique; namely, Hick's thesis does not seem to satisfy the very idea of pluralism, excessively constraining what counts as religion or not and generalizing ideas from his own religion (soteriology, Real) to other religions (Spica 2018a), resulting in a homogenization of religions.

However, these criticisms of Hick's thesis do not undermine every and any pluralist theory. There are various other pluralist approaches, and some of them attempt simultaneously to avoid the problems generated by Hick's position and provide a solid counterpoint to exclusivism. Among these is Victoria Harrison's internalist pluralism. Internalist pluralism is nothing more than:

An adaptation to the religious domain of internal realism – a theory first advanced by Hilary Putnam. Like the Putnamian internal realist, the adherent of internalist pluralism holds both that whichever objects can be said to exist is conceptual-scheme dependent and that whatever it means for an object to exist is equally conceptual-scheme dependent. (Harrison 2008, 98)

In this sense, such a theory centres around the idea that religious realities and statements can only be adequately understood and discussed within a particular conceptual scheme, and it does not make sense to speak of a 'Real' that exists outside of a conceptual scheme. Thus, a defence of pluralism, to be consistent, should acknowledge that a meaningful discussion of alleged religious realities and truths is only possible when they are understood within their respective conceptual schemes or 'instances of faith'.

In summary, internal pluralism proposes that each religious statement makes sense within its instance of faith or conceptual schemes. The conceptual schemes that shape reality and truths determine what counts as true and what does not, what counts as real and what does not. In this sense, different religions are distinct conceptual frameworks, untranslatable from one to another, and it cannot be said that there is anything

in common between these systems or that they all result from experiences of a reality that transcends them. Thus, as Burley (2020) aptly explains, Harrison avoids both eliminativism and reductionism in her approach to plurality. This is because she does not advocate for any defining criterion of what is and is not religion that would eliminate systems that do not meet that criterion, while simultaneously allowing for the diversity of all religious systems without homogenizing them based on the experience of a particular religion.

Harrison's theory, however, has other problems, despite being interesting and avoiding the trap of homogenizing and reducing religions, as Hick's thesis does. Among them, I would like to highlight what I will call religious isolationism. Essentially, by arguing that religious belief systems equate to conceptual schemes and that these systems are independent, and each has its concepts related to the particular realities within each framework, Harrison isolates these systems completely. In other words, to escape Hick's trap of homogenization and reductionism, Harrison explains religious diversity in such manner that essentially renders different religions utterly unrelated to each other. However, it is hard to claim that because different belief systems exist and do not have some essence concurrent to them all, it follows that mutual understanding among the different systems is impossible. We can develop a belief system in an isolated context, but that does not mean that someone outside that context cannot understand the system; the belief systems are not private and isolated. There is an exchange of knowledge and practices in the religious context and in all our lives. The different belief systems are not entirely disconnected and isolated; there is no incommensurable gap between them (Spica 2018b).

Furthermore, an idea like Harrison's does not find support in the history of religions. Anthropology, history, and other fields that study the development of religions demonstrate that, in their evolution, religions tend to adopt ideas, practices, and even doctrines from one another, adapting them to their own practices, ideas, and doctrines, as we will see in the case of Afro-Brazilian religions. It is these religions which I intend to turn to specifically because I believe they can shed light on pluralist approaches, both to avoid falling into the exclusive logical structure and to prevent drifting into a kind of isolationism that hinders a proper understanding of religions.

Afro-Brazilian religions

Afro-Brazilian religions are those Brazilian religions that originate from ideas, concepts, and rituals characteristic of African religions, mixed or transformed by the Brazilian religious context during their history of formation and development. There is a pretty large variety of denominations of such religions, and they are greatly nuanced.⁴ Among these stand out, for example, Quimbanda, Xambá, Toré, Terecô, Babassuê, Jarê, Catimbó, Tambor de Mina, Pajelança, Candomblé, and Umbanda. The last two are well known and have the most significant number of adherents; therefore, their doctrines and cults are better known and studied than the other denominations.

Some scholars (Rivas Neto 2013; Carneiro 2014) divide such religions into schools or sets of Afro-Brazilian religions according to their similarities. A first set would be the religions grouped in the cults of nations that have strong African influence and whose cults emphasize Orixás, Voduns, and Inquices. In this first set come the three best-known nations of Candomblé: Candomblé Ketu, Jeje, and Angola-Congo. In addition to the Candomblés, others denominations belong to the first group, such as Batuque, Jarê, Ifá cult, Egungun, Xambá, and Xangô do Nordeste. The second group would be formed by the Umbandas, which would be characterized by the presence of an ancestral cult. In this group would be present the various denominations of Umbandas (Omolocô,

Umbandaime, Esoteric Umbanda, Umbanda Oriental, Mystical Umbanda, etc.), Cabula, and Quimbanda. And more likely, a third group would be formed by the so-called Encantarias, which are denominations marked by the presence of enchanted beings. In this group would be denominations like Catimbó, Jurema, Babassuê, Pajelança, Tambor de Mina, Toré, and Terecô. Rivas Neto (2013) draws attention to the fact that such groups are not closed, but there is a dialogue and some exchanges between these sets of religions and between the different internal denominations of the sets. This nuanced variety of denominations also makes it difficult to establish a clear and objective definition of these religions without falling into a generalization that disregards their important defining elements. Here, I will consider Afro-Brazilian religions as the religious denominations of African origin or influence that have developed in Brazil and share similarities in their practices and beliefs. I will also focus on ideas from Umbandas and Candomblés, as they are Brazil's two most widely spread denominations.

Candomblé is older than Umbanda and originates in nineteenth-century Brazil through the syncretism between African religions, mainly Yoruba and Bantu, and some elements of Catholicism. In this way, Candomblé is a kind of Afro-diasporic religion. There are three main nations of Candomblé, based on the origin of the traditions: the Candomblé Ketu of the Yoruba tradition, also called Candomblé Nagô; Candomblé Angola or Congo-Angola of Bantu origin; and the Candomblé Jeje, which has its origins in the so-called Jeje-Fom peoples. In general, practitioners of Candomblé believe in deities of nature associated with natural elements. Candomblé believes that every person is chosen by a deity at birth, and they govern them. The Candomblé followers believe that deities possess initiated individuals during religious rites. These rites are characterized by dance and music. Practitioners of Candomblé also often offer animals, vegetables, minerals, songs, and dances to the deities. It is important to note that during the twentieth century, Candomblé underwent a process of Africanization, where an effort was made to set aside certain elements absorbed from Catholicism and advocate a return to African origins (Prandi 2004). Despite this attempt at Africanization, many syncretic elements persist in the rituals and popular imagination of Candomblé.

Umbanda, on the other hand, has some similarities with Candomblé. This religion is the result of a hybridization of Candomblé, Kardecism, popular Catholicism, and elements from Brazil's indigenous peoples (Engler 2012). In Umbanda, as in Candomblé, practitioners incorporate spirits. However, they are not considered deities, more so ancestral spirits who incarnate in mediums during the ritual. Such spirits are disincarnated ancestors who have attained the degree of spiritual masters who return to earth to practise charity. In this sense, Umbanda is a mediumistic religion while Candomblé is not (Spica 2021). Umbanda is considered a genuinely Brazilian religion and emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. In general, in the studies of such religion, the term 'Umbanda' is not used in the singular, as there is not just one form of Umbanda but multiple 'Umbandas' with significant differences in rituals and beliefs (Simas 2021).

In both Candomblé and Umbanda, there is the belief in life after death and reincarnation. However, the notion of reincarnation in both religions plays a different role. In Candomblé, reincarnation has no final objective: the return to the earth happens because life here is good. In Umbanda, on the other hand, each life is an opportunity to learn and evolve to move to another stage of life by transcending. Such differentiation also reflects on the ethical apparatus of such religions (Spica 2021). While Candomblé does not possess a good and evil dualism, Umbanda separates these two spheres into the moulds of the Christian religion and Kardecism (Prandi 2004). However, the non-duality between good and evil in Candomblé cannot be considered an unethical religion since its practitioners are aware that they are doing good or evil and come to believe in a kind of law of return, in the sense that when evil is done, evil is received, and in doing good, good is received. In

this way, Candomblé is a religion in which there is no idea of salvation or redemption from sin, as in Christianity (Ferretti 2008).

In addition to the more specific points of Afro-Brazilian religions already discussed, Porcher and Carlucci (2023) highlight four important general characteristics to consider in studying Afro-Brazilian religions. These characteristics distinguish Afro-Brazilian religions from religions traditionally examined in the philosophy of religion. They are as follows:

First, they are orally transmitted, and there are no agreed-upon textual sources. Second, they are noninstitutionalized in that no central authority controls Candomblé or Umbanda, and practitioners organize in autonomous groups. Third, they are ritual-focused, and there is no centrality to the profession of faith. Fourth, they are significantly embodied in their ritual ceremonies that involve dancing, singing, and drumming. (Porcher and Carlucci 2023, 4)

Porcher and Carlucci argue that these characteristics of Afro-Brazilian religions can shed light on the philosophy of religion as a whole, causing it to turn towards other questions beyond those of the classical philosophy of religion. This contribution arises from the fact that these religions have, as central elements, aspects that are only peripheral or disregarded in some other religions. In this sense, they believe that Afro-Brazilian religions can assist the philosophy of religion in expanding its scope and address issues other than Western theism's classical questions.⁵

I agree with Porcher and Carlucci that Afro-Brazilian religions have the characteristics listed by them and that these religions can broaden the horizons of the philosophy of religion. However, regarding the characteristics, I would like to add a fifth characteristic in addition to the four already mentioned, namely, the characteristic of syncretism or hybridity.⁶ In other words, Afro-Brazilian religions have, as a defining feature, significant and varied syncretic elements. However, more than just bringing this characteristic to light, I believe it can aid the philosophy of religious diversity. Nevertheless, before demonstrating how this would be possible, I would like to present syncretism as a wisdom of Afro-Brazilian religions.

Syncretism: a wisdom of Afro-Brazilian religions

Many studies show that the formation of Afro-Brazilian religions occurs in a long process of syncretism (Engler 2012; Ferretti 2013; Johnson 2016; Simas 2021). This syncretism is facilitated by encountering different religious traditions, including European Christian traditions, Bantu and Yoruba cults and rituals, French Kardecism, and the worldviews and rituals of the indigenous peoples who inhabited Brazil before the arrival of Europeans and Africans. Many of these syncretisms occurred as a way of asserting the identity of enslaved peoples during the colonization period, while others happened spontaneously through the convergence of various religious practices that inhabited and still inhabit Brazilian territory. Syncretic processes are complex and generally involve mixing, overlapping, and transforming practices, rites, and beliefs from different religions in their encounters (whether forced or not) with each other.⁷ They result from the constant interactions that a particular religion undergoes throughout its history. These interactions directly influence its own identity in terms of self-affirmation and modifying certain aspects of its doctrine and practice when it encounters another religion. Therefore, for this work, I would like to treat syncretism as a process of fusions, blends, convergences, and/or adaptations of elements of a religion when it comes in contact with other religions.⁸

Although this process is highlighted as a constant in the history of religions (Veer 2005; Johnson 2016; Fridlund 2018), it is often viewed negatively. Ferretti (1998), for instance, points out that, while often misunderstood, this concept is viewed as negative by some researchers because they perceive syncretism as a confusing mixture of different elements or simply as an imposition of colonialist or evolutionary elements. In the first case, these authors forget that syncretism is not merely the adoption of contradictory beliefs and practices but rather a creative process of adapting these beliefs and practices to the new system.⁹ Even when we talk about the mere addition of a belief or practice to a new system, we need to understand that a modification process aligns these new beliefs and practices with the entire belief and practice system of the religion in question. In other words, syncretic processes are transformative and creative (Spica 2022). Beyond the criticism that syncretism is an imposition of colonialist and/or evolutionary elements, it is essential to highlight that, although this was indeed the case in various historical moments, syncretic processes are a continuum in the history of religions. They have happened and continue to happen as a natural result of encounters and exchanges of experiences between religions. An excellent example is Afro-Brazilian religiosity.

It cannot be denied that many of the syncretic processes within Afro-Brazilian religiosity resulted from impositions by European religions on indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans. This syncretism was an imposed and violent process, transformed by African people to maintain their religiosity (Nascimento 2016). However, some scholars also emphasize syncretic processes as a form of wisdom. For instance, Ferretti (1998, 198) highlights that 'Afro-Brazilian syncretism was a strategy of survival and adaptation that Africans brought to the New World. In the African continent, adopting deities among the conquered and conquerors in peaceful or hostile encounters with neighboring peoples was common. It was a strategy of wisdom' that allowed them not to accept fully what the colonizer wanted to impose. This idea is also reinforced by Reis (1996), who states:

This willingness to blend cultures was imperative for survival, an exercise of wisdom also reflected in the skill demonstrated by *quilombolas* in forming social alliances, which inevitably was translated into cultural transformations and interpenetrations. It is obvious that enslaved people and *quilombolas* were compelled to change things that they would not have changed if not subjected to the pressures of slavery and colonialism. However, they directed many of these changes because they did not allow themselves to become what the master desired. In this lies the strength and beauty of the culture that enslaved people and *quilombolas* bequeathed to posterity. (Reis 1996, 20)

The wisdom referred to by Ferretti and Reis is a wisdom rooted in African cultural ancestry – an ancestry that had encountered various other religious traditions before arriving in Brazil, such as Christianity and Islam. This ancestral wisdom manifested in the ability to blend different ideas, rituals, images, and beliefs and transform them to such an extent that it can be said that Afro-Brazilian religions differ from both their African ancestral religions and European religions, especially Christianity.

This wisdom is found not only in religious practice but also in particular concepts of African ancestry, such as the case of the concept of vital force. The vital force in the Yorubá tradition is named *Axé*, and in the Bantu tradition, *Móyo*.¹⁰ *Axé*, in the Yoruba tradition, is the divine or first spiritual force (Bankole 2009) or the life force present in all things in the universe. *Axé* is the strength responsible for creating and ordering all things. '*Axé* is a fluid concept in that it bridges the space between the seen and unseen worlds. It exists in all things' (Bankole 2009, 75). Like a life force, *Axé* is a transformative force, which is always in action, ordering and reordering the world. In this sense, it is also a creative and renewing force (Schmidt 2012). As it is present in all things, the *Axé* of an element can

influence the *Axé* from another element. Therefore, a person's *Axé* can positively or negatively influence the *Axé* of others, just as a human *Axé* can influence the *Axé* from other animal, vegetable, or mineral beings. A similar idea is also present in the concept of *Môyo* of the Bantu tradition.

Môyo is understood as the life force and the providing element of the Bantu way of life (*kibântu*) (Simas 2021). *Môyo* is present in everything, from rocks to human beings (Fu-Kiau 2003). In the case of humans, it is essential to highlight the idea that individuals can enrich their *Môyo* by connecting with the *Môyo* of other beings and natural elements. However, more importantly, for my purposes here, *Môyo* also resides in peoples and cultures, and peoples and cultures can enrich their *Môyo* through relationships with other peoples and cultures. Simas (2021, 47) emphasizes that in this Bantu concept, when we open ourselves to 'experience the *Môyo* of other communities, we can nourish, renew, and recreate our own *Môyo*'. In doing so, we do not necessarily need to discard our current beliefs but recognize the strength of other beliefs as important sources of essential elements for human life.¹¹ 'Allowing oneself to be affected by others – and allowing them to be affected in this process as well – is to be constantly available to renew, recreate, and invent life all the time – and at all times' (Simas 2021, 47).

In sum, the idea of life force shows how life and all its elements are dynamic and fluid and that 'in the original African thought, a being is able to indirectly influence another being' (Lopes and Simas 2020, 28). These ideas were brought by Africans to Brazil and continue to play an important role in the base worldview of Afro-Brazilian religions. However, it is not only in the idea of life force that we can find traces of a kind of syncretic wisdom. It is also present in the idea of crossroads and market in some Afro-Brazilian traditions. Nogueira (2020), for example, draws attention to the fact that the *Nagô* notion of the market is one of the philosophical ideas present in many of the *terreiros* communities (communities proper to Afro-Brazilian traditions). The market here is the space of exchanges. The author points out that, in different versions of Candomblé, the market is the space of Exu Olojá, the deity of exchanges and paths. In the market, all kinds of exchanges are made, whether economic and spiritual exchanges or exchanges with *orishas* and other human beings. The market notion is interesting because it enables us to see that in Afro-Brazilian traditions, there is a wisdom that opens to others and is willing to exchange with them at various levels.

The idea of *Encruzilhada* (crossroads) is another idea that helps us to understand how Afro-Brazilian religions deal with the differences and the encounters with them. From a decolonial perspective, Simas and Rufino (2018) draw attention to the fact that it is in the *Encruzilhada*, as a border and cross-zone, that arises a new possibility of inventing life in nuances of diversity. It is in the *Encruzilhada* that the difference is and that the exchanges that allow the transformations of knowledge arise because in the *Encruzilhada*, life is always reinventing itself. This is because the *Encruzilhada* is dominated by Exu in its various denominations (Simas and Rufino 2018). In the *Encruzilhada*, Exu is present as Elegbara (Lord of magical powers), and he shows, in his unpredictability, the importance of other ways. Like Igbá Ketá (Lord of the Third Gourd), Exu, through his power, shows the importance of transgressing dichotomies. However, Exu is also present as Enugbarijó (Lord of the collective mouth), as the one who swallows to spit differently.¹²

All these ideas demonstrate the dynamism with which African ancestry engages with its worldview. Life and everything that is part of it, including religion, is dynamic, fluid, not stagnant, and therefore subject to changes and enrichments. Moreover, this idea resonates in the syncretic practice of Afro-Brazilian religiosity, which applies ancestral wisdom, first as a form of resistance but also as a way to reinforce identities.

In this sense, reducing Afro-Brazilian syncretism to mere colonialist or evolutionary imposition is impossible. Doing so would fail to respect the Afro-Brazilian wisdom that

carried out such processes. Furthermore, dismissing Afro-Brazilian syncretism simply as a historical error that should be corrected is disregarding an entire wisdom capable of executing it and continuing to do so. As it is a fundamental wisdom in Afro-Brazilian religions,¹³ we must also acknowledge that it is not confined to a specific historical period. On the contrary, it should be understood as something bequeathed to the descendants of enslaved people as a way of shaping their own identities. This should be treated as a fact, as despite the efforts of some researchers to attempt a return of some Afro-Brazilian religions to their African origins in the purification of their syncretisms,¹⁴ it remains in popular Afro-Brazilian religiosity and also in other religious practices in Brazil (Soares 2003; Spica 2018b).

However, beyond its being a fact in Afro-Brazilian religiosity, recognizing syncretism as a form of wisdom can help us better understand the religious phenomenon as a whole and, in my opinion, shed light on essential debates regarding religious diversity, especially in the issues presented in the pluralist theories discussed above.

The syncretic wisdom of Afro-Brazilian religiosity and the philosophy of religious diversity

In the first section, I presented two problems in pluralistic perspectives regarding religious diversity: on the one hand, the problem of homogenizing religiosity, as in the case of Hick, and on the other hand, religious isolationism, as in Harrison's approach. I understand that the syncretic wisdom of Afro-Brazilian religiosity could be an excellent example to be considered by pluralist theories to avoid these two problems and, at the same time, provide a solid response to exclusivist accusations that any pluralist approach is ultimately exclusivist. However, what would make this possible?

First, this would be possible because Afro-Brazilian religious practice is not as concerned with conceptual purism. As we have already shown, for many scholars of these religions, purist concerns in these religions are generally more related to intellectualism than Afro-Brazilian religious practice. These religious practices adopt their wisdom in blending and overlapping ideas, concepts, and practices from different ways of life to enrich their ways of life. In this sense, Afro-Brazilian daily practices do not see themselves as belief systems wholly isolated from other belief systems, nor as completely autonomous from them, while also not maintaining a completely exclusivist attitude towards other religions. In other words, other religions can be a source of enrichment and revitalization for a particular religion.

In enriching their religions and faith, other religions are often seen as sources from which one can acquire new wisdom.¹⁵ In this sense, Afro-Brazilian religions can shed light on the study of religious diversity by demonstrating that religious systems are neither necessarily completely exclusivist nor entirely isolated. They can connect with other religious systems and recognize the significance within them, translating the teachings and understandings of other systems into their own without necessarily needing to convert to this new system. Thus, they can demonstrate both the error of exclusivist logic and the flaw in internalist pluralist logic.

In this sense, a close examination of Afro-Brazilian religiosity can expand the horizons of the philosophy of religious diversity. This is because while syncretism and hybridism are treated as significant phenomena in other areas of religious studies, they are practically absent in the philosophy of religious diversity. When they do appear, they are generally viewed negatively. Afro-Brazilian religiosity, however, shows us that syncretisms can be natural to religions and, more than that, important transformative sources of religions (Schmidt-Leukel 2009; Spica 2022).¹⁶ Thus, a true philosophy of religious diversity

should not only seek to compare concepts from different religions but also strive to understand the creative and transformative processes that occur when different religions intersect. This could assist philosophy in recognizing that religions are more dynamic and less pure processes than exclusivists often advocate while also prompting pluralists to acknowledge that before attempting to apply philosophical concepts to religiosity, we should first contemplate such diversity and its movements.

From this perspective arises the second contribution that Afro-Brazilian wisdom can offer to the philosophy of religious diversity. I will refer to this contribution as a methodological contribution. As we have seen, one of the characteristics of Afro-Brazilian religiosity is its ability to engage in syncretism. New experiences and contacts can give rise to new rituals, beliefs, practices, and ways of seeing and thinking about the world. This understanding of life in general and religiosity in particular contradicts the idea that it is impossible to break free from the exclusivist logic in which we always approach the other with certainties and pre-established criteria that lead us to evaluate what is right and wrong. Faced with new ways of perceiving and living religiosity and life, we do not always evaluate them before engaging with them. Often, these ways of life naturally impose themselves on us as part of our lives. Before we realize it, we are already experiencing new practices, cults, and beliefs that we had not previously considered (Spica 2018a). We have already enriched our lives with them.

Afro-Brazilian syncretism teaches us that no prior criterion defines correct or incorrect syncretism; the correctness or incorrectness of this process unfolds within the process itself. Syncretism is dynamic, and in the face of a new system, the believer can embrace certain aspects while rejecting others; things can emerge while others disappear.¹⁷ Assuming that one type of syncretism is more valuable than another is, on the contrary, already imposing a 'should be' on syncretism, which often does not align with the reality of encounters between different religions that occur in the believer's daily religious life.

In this sense, there is no criterion prior to the syncretic process itself that defines a better or worse syncretism. This could help philosophical approaches to religious diversity, primarily by showing us that we should first observe and understand religious processes before conceptualizing them and binding them to concepts, which are sometimes artificial and do not align with the reality of religious practice.¹⁸ In this regard, rather than defining criteria, often exclusionary, for what constitutes a religion or not, we should pay attention to religious practice and see how it unfolds. In other words, methodologically, we should reverse our process of studying different religions. Instead of creating vague and broad concepts and applying them to understanding different religions, we should contemplate these religions and then engage with them. In this sense, more than discovering things we can think about different religions, the philosophy of religious diversity should be more concerned with what is involved in religious modes of thought (Spica 2018a). In other words, such a philosopher should be concerned with bringing to light what is sometimes hidden in ways of life, rituals, concepts, and religious practices.

To do this, the philosophers of religious diversity cannot merely confine themselves to theological concepts or doctrines. Instead, they must scrutinize the religious ways of life themselves, seeking similarities and dissimilarities within them and ultimately allowing them to develop their internal dynamics without attempting to impose something external onto these ways of life or regulate them from the outside. After all, from an Afro-Brazilian perspective, our life force is in constant motion and seeks enrichment through new experiences. Only when these experiences are contrary to life's fullness should they be avoided (Fu-Kiau 2003; Simas 2021). Nevertheless, this is something normal in syncretic processes; religions themselves can define what works in their favour within syncretic processes without the need for the philosopher's interference (Spica 2018b).

The third contribution that Afro-Brazilian religiosity can offer to the philosophy of religious diversity is the quest for defining what is or is not a religion. As highlighted by Porcher and Carlucci (2023), there is no centralizing and defining element, no specific profession of faith that determines what counts as Afro-Brazilian religion and what does not. In some sense, we can say that Afro-Brazilian religiosity can be characterized as Afro-Brazilian religions through a set of characteristics similar to Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblances. In other words, no definitive and defining concept characterizes an essence of Afro-Brazilian religiosity. Instead, some characteristics are present in some of these religions, while others are present in different religions, but there is nothing that permeates all of them. Moreover, such religions cannot be considered ready-made or finished; they are fluid and constantly transformed. Like dancing religions (Simas 2021), new steps and choreographies can be developed and incorporated into their rituals, doctrines, and ways of life.

This, in my view, can make us see that, more than doing philosophy of religious diversity based on a ready and defined concept of religion, we should turn our attention to contemplating religious diversity and realize that we cannot use 'religion' in the singular but in the plural. In this sense, searching for criteria that define what is or is not religion would be, at the very least, secondary, if not unnecessary, in studying religious diversity.

Conclusion

My objective was to demonstrate that Afro-Brazilian religions can expand and support the philosophy of religious diversity from a pluralistic perspective. I first presented two problems in different pluralist theories: homogenization and isolationism. Both problems are significant because they are two sides of the same coin. In other words, pluralist theses fall into religious homogenization or isolationism. After demonstrating this, I presented some important characteristics of Afro-Brazilian religiosity, with a focus on the issue of syncretism. My point here was to highlight syncretism as a kind of wisdom present in Afro-Brazilian religiosity that also needs to be recognized as an important source for new studies of religious diversity. From there, I presented some possible contributions that Afro-Brazilian religiosity could offer to philosophical studies of religious diversity.

In conclusion, it is essential to note that the above contributions may not be the only possible contributions of Afro-Brazilian religions to studying diversity. I understand that simply considering the dynamism and variety of Afro-Brazilian religiosity can provide important elements to scholars of religious diversity that will contribute to such studies. In this sense, this work is not intended to be the final point in the contributions of Afro-Brazilian religiosity to the philosophy of religious diversity but rather a starting point for discussions of such contributions.

Notes

1. The Real is treated by Hick as transcategorial in the sense of something that is beyond the categories of our understanding.
2. For Hick, no intrinsic attribute may be assigned to the Real. For example, I refer to it in the singular rather than the plural because of the limitations of our language. Our concepts do not reach the ultimacy of the Real (Hick 1982, 1995).
3. A response from Hick to D'Costa is presented in Hick (1997).
4. For the sake of delimitation, my goal is not to completely characterize Afro-Brazilian religions, not even addressing all their elements and characteristics, which would be impossible to do only from a philosophical perspective. It would be necessary to include other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and religion sciences in general. In this sense, this brief characterization of Afro-Brazilian religions serves only to show the variety and richness of traditions present in this broad concept. My main point is to show only one of

the possible contributions that such religious traditions can make to the philosophy of religion. Certainly, there are many more being explored and many to be explored.

5. In this sense, Porcher and Carlucci agree with positions like that of Schilbrack (2014), who argues that the philosophy of religion needs to expand and consider other aspects besides the doctrinal aspects of religions, such as rituals, experiences, and myths. This position is also shared by some pluralist authors, such as Mikel Burley (2020).

6. Although it may seem as if I am treating syncretism and hybridism as synonyms, I acknowledge an important difference between them. Drawing inspiration from the distinctions made by Engler (2009), I understand hybridism in a broader perspective than syncretism. In this sense, hybridism would be a comprehensive mixture of cultural, political, historical, and social elements within a particular religious context. On the other hand, syncretism would refer more to a blending of religious elements. In other words, syncretism is something more limited to exchanges between religions. Afro-Brazilian religiosity is undoubtedly the result of religious, cultural, political, and social mixtures. However, since my focus here is on discussing religious diversity, I have chosen to work specifically with the characteristic of syncretism, which pertains to the blending of beliefs, practices, and religious rituals carried out within these religions.

7. The concept of syncretism I use in this article is based on the work of Ferretti (2013). According to Ferretti, certain religions go through moments of divergence during which their beliefs, practices, and rituals cease to be coherent. An example of diversification can be observed in the relationship between the Catholic religion and some rituals of African origin, particularly animal sacrifice, which is present in the latter but condemned by the former. It is essential to realize that diversification is just one moment within the whole; in other words, the fact that certain specific rites, practices, and beliefs are incoherent does not imply that syncretism does not occur in other aspects of the system. Mixing, fusion, or interreligious hybridization occurs when different religions practise identical rituals. This 'process of parallelism or juxtaposition can be exemplified in the relationships between the *Orixás* and Catholic saints or other entities' (Ferretti 2013, 262) and is one of the most common syncretic processes. Furthermore, processes of convergence or adaptation occur when different religious manifestations share similar values and ideas and can, therefore, adapt to different systems.

8. In this way, it is important to differentiate syncretism from other possible phenomena that occur in the process of encounters between two or more religions. The encounter process can result in separation or non-syncretism when there are irreconcilable issues between the different religions. In this case, religious people separate and reaffirm the current ideas and practices from the newly encountered, denying the validity of the beliefs and practices of the system they had contact with or, at least, becoming indifferent to them. In addition, it is possible that the conversion occurs in the process of encountering. That is, the believer adopts the new system in its entirety. Syncretism is neither separation nor conversion. Syncretism occurs when the juxtaposition, fusion, blends, adaptations, and transformations of internal beliefs and practices occur. In the syncretic process, there is a change in beliefs and practices of a religious system.

9. I will write more about this in the following pages.

10. It is important to note that the *Môyo* concept is not so used in everyday Brazilian religiosity as the concept of *Axé*, but for many scholars of such religiosity, the idea of *Môyo* plays an important role in the constitution of some religiosities, such as Candomblé Congo, Quimbanda, and Umbandas (Prandi 2004; Lundell 2022). Other authors (Simas and Rufino 2018; Simas 2021) draw attention to the fact that, although Bantu tradition has given a lot of weight to the traditions and Yoruba concepts in the studies of Afro-Brazilian religiosity, it must be recognized that Bantu tradition has a huge influence on many Afro-Brazilian religious manifestations. Although it is not spoken or used daily, the importance of the *Môyo* concept is reassembling a pearl of ancestral wisdom that shows an idea of syncretic wisdom, the object of this article.

11. It is interesting to note that one of the most common criticisms of the syncretic process is that it causes religions to lose their identities (Vroom 1989). In Afro-Brazilian syncretic wisdom, on the other hand, identity does not seem to be fixed and determined but rather something in constant construction that needs to be nourished and revitalized, even through contact with other identities.

12. This idea is even interesting for exploring the notion of syncretism not as a mere joining of opposite concepts and practices but as creative transformation. Just as Exu Enugbarijó eats all things and spits them out as something different, syncretic practices, in the encounter between different religions, feed on different ideas and turn them into something completely new and different within their systems (Lundell 2022).

13. Kambele Munanga, using the term 'transculturation', asserts that this concept defines the entire Afro-Brazilian culture. He states:

The 'purity' of the Yoruba and Bantu cultures is a concern for some researchers and has nothing to do with the practices and strategies of those who bequeathed what is known as black culture in Brazil. Africanized enslaved people and their descendants were never confined to exclusive ideological models. Their practices

and strategies developed within the transcultural model to form rich and stable personal identities that could not be solely structured within the confines of their own culture. (Munanga 1996, 63)

14. Generally, such attempts are linked to an authoritarian and intellectualistic imposition of a vision of pure religiosity (Ferretti 1998).

15. An interesting example of this is what we see in the work of Master Arhapiagha (Rivas Neto 2007) entitled *Umbanda: a protossíntese cósmica* (*Umbanda: A Cosmic Protosynthesis*). This work is considered mediumistic. In it, Mestre Arhapiagha, writing about syncretism, says that this 'is a mystical-religious phenomenon that aims to make intelligible a cult that can be practiced by various people or ethnic groups, which so far had different rituals and conceptions' (Rivas Neto 2007, 253). He states that this phenomenon is a way of uniting and raising human creatures to other levels of evolution, which, in our view, demonstrates how valued such a phenomenon is within some Umbandas.

16. Someone could argue that the fact that the Afro-Brazilian religions are demographically minoritarian might render them a non-representative case for the importance of syncretism in the understanding of religious diversity as a whole since minoritarian religions would be more subject to the pressure of majoritarian ones. I think that such criticism does not take seriously the question discussed above that syncretisms do not occur only in an imposing way, but are also creative answers to interreligious encounters. There are several syncretisms in various historical periods of different religions. In Brazil, even majoritarian religions go through syncretic processes. There are several studies, for example, showing how syncretism is present in Brazilian and Latin American Catholicism and that this syncretism goes beyond the barriers imposed by its conservative leaders. Despite its being a religion with a doctrine already determined and established, the lived Catholicism, that is, the Catholicism practised in the day-to-day of the Catholic believer, is also syncretic (Marzal 1985; Boff 2011; Spica 2018b). Moreover, it seems that the wisdom of Afro-Brazilian religions themselves accepts the fact that their religious manifestations do not need to be exclusive. In this wisdom, the religiosity of others is decent and true and may be added or not, but it should never be demonized or discredited (Nogueira 2020).

17. This is an important point for thinking about the relationship between syncretism and religious diversity. Someone could argue, for example, that syncretism decreases or could decrease religious diversity. Such an argument could be based on a kind of calculation that would say that due to the blend of different beliefs and religious practices in a new practice, it would eliminate two religions to create one, for example. Another possible argument would be to say that syncretism eventually homogenizes religious practices and rites, as all religions end up performing similar practices and rites. Although these ideas can be defended, they do not seem to coincide with the reality of Afro-Brazilian religiosity. Religious syncretism in Brazil, as in other parts of the world, such as Japan and China (Ching 1993; Cheng 2011; Johnson 2016), usually leads to new belief and practice systems without eliminating existing systems. For example, the variety of Afro-Brazilian religions is an interesting factor in favour of the idea that syncretism fosters diversity. Syncretic processes were and still are responsible for creating a growing variety of religious systems in Brazil. Moreover, Afro-Brazilian religions themselves, in general, as already shown above, do not understand that their existence implies the disappearance of other religious systems; what they think is that different systems perform exchanges at the crossroads of their existence (Simas and Rufino 2018; Nogueira 2020).

18. Perhaps Burley's (2020) perspective is closer to taking the specificities of Afro-Brazilian religions seriously than other pluralist theses.

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