

AN ARGUMENT FOR THE EXPANSION OF PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION: A COMMENTARY OF AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS BY JOSÉ EDUARDO PORCHER

UM ARGUMENTO A FAVOR DA EXPANSÃO DA FILOSOFIA
DA RELIGIÃO: UM COMENTÁRIO SOBRE AFRO-BRAZILIAN
RELIGIONS DE JOSÉ EDUARDO PORCHER

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African-derived religions have been studied by anthropologists for decades. While some traditionalists still prefer the study of indigenous cultures, African-derived religions are nowadays an important field for anthropology. However, other disciplines have been slower in recognizing the importance of these religions at the crossroads of Brazilian, European, and Indigenous epistemologies (Lundell 2022). Even the study of religions that has focused since its beginning on Abrahamic traditions and other so-called ‘world religions’ has been slow in opening to the study of indigenous religions (Owen 2011), let alone African-derived religions. This has changed now, and a growing number of researchers reflect on African-derived religions to challenge previously held concepts about religion and ontology. African-derived religions are no longer only interesting areas to study from an ethnographic perspective but provide a tool for a decolonial perspective on religion (Rufino 2016) that questions the Euro-centered epistemic coloniality (Lundell 2022: 105, referring to Simas and Rufino 2018). The ontological turn in anthropology that highlighted that etic concepts “do not make sense in other epistemologies” (Lundell 2022: 105), changed also the study of religions that is moving away from Euro-centered categories. African-derived categories have, as Lundell writes, intellectual decolonizing potentialities and provide us with theoretical and methodological tools for analysis.

This huge potential has now also reached philosophy of religion which is still preoccupied, “with a narrow range of questions concerning an ahistorical and decontextualized ‘theism’” (Burley 2018: 1-2). While the anthropologist Tim Ingold defines anthropology as “philosophical inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of life in the one world we all inhabit” (2018: 158), philosophy has long dismissed anthropology and its field of inquiry as exotic descriptions of what people do but not what they think. While anthropologists indeed placed traditionally practice over thoughts, this has changed with the ontological turn. For instance, Irving Hallowell who worked with the Ojibwe, included in his writings stories which point towards a different way of thinking about the world that is at the heart of Ojibwe ontology (1960: 23). Indigenous storywork has become a methodology for decolonizing research as the collection of papers edited by Jo-ann Archibald Q’um Q’um Xiiem, Jenny Bol Jun Lee-Morgan, and Jason de Santolo (2022) show.

This book by José Eduardo Porcher provides excellent material that will contribute to filling the gap in philosophy of religion. More than an introduction into African-derived religions, the book presents a persuasive argument for using African-derived religions as analytical tool to questions preconceived and largely Euro-centric ideas. Reflecting on mythic narratives, practices of sacrifice, initiation and spirit possession, José is following Viveiros de Castro's directive to confront the ethnocentric bias within Western philosophy (2011: 133). He successfully shows that engaging with these practices and traditions that have been so long overlooked can lead to the methodological expansions required for the philosophy of religion. As he argues in the opening chapter, philosophy of religions is slowly changing, mainly in response to the growing attacks on its methodology, scope and motivations. José is not alone in calling for renewal but follows Kevin Schilbrack's footsteps who has argued so vehemently for overhauling the philosophy of religion (Schilbrack 2014). But while Schilbrack presents a diagnosis of the traditional philosophy of religion, José's book offers material that can be used for teaching the next generation of philosophers of religion. By focusing on Candomblé and other African-derived religions in Brazil the book teaches its reader a new philosophy of religion that expand the narrow understanding of philosophy. As Timothy Knepper writes, "if one wants to philosophize about religion, then one needs to understand religion in all its messy cultural-historical diversity" (Knepper 2013: 76, cited in Burley 2018: 1). Contrary to Knepper's book title *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion* I see it as a renewal, not the end. Philosophers today work in a decolonizing world and consequently aim to diversify philosophy. By offering a new introduction to African-derived religions in Brazil for philosophers of religion, the book contributes to a shift of mainstream philosophy, not 'just' Afro-Brazilian philosophy. It goes therefore beyond previous attempts to put forward local philosophies such as African philosophy or Chinese philosophy. For instance, the philosopher Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze highlights the value of ethnographically enriched philosophical analysis (2001: 206-207) and argues that "African philosophy may indeed be considered a representative voice of counterhegemonic histories of modern philosophy" (2001: 207). His African philosophy is conceived "with multi-cultural and international philosophic dialogues in mind" (1998: ix). However, in order to change philosophy, philosophy needs to expand and put at its core the engagement with practices that challenge Euro-centric concepts, like José does in his book. Only the acknowledgment of a diverse form of religions can lead to a radical pluralist philosophy of religion, as Burley's book demands (2020). I end with an excerpt from José's book that exemplifies the need to change:

"In ignoring so many traditions, the questions philosophers of religion ask (and the answers they offer) reveal a degree of religious illiteracy that throws doubt on its relevance to the academic study of religion and on whether it even deserves the name philosophy of religion. The discipline must thus expand its current focus to become a global form of critical reflection on religions in all their varieties and dimensions in dialogue with other branches of philosophy and with other disciplines of the academic study of religions." (Porcher 2025: 2)

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