

MONARCHIC METAPHYSICS IN WESTERN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION: A CONVERSATION WITH JOSÉ EDUARDO PORCHER'S AFRO- BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS

METAFÍSICA MONÁRQUICA EM FILOSOFIA OCIDENTAL
DA RELIGIÃO: UMA CONVERSA COM AFRO-BRAZILIAN
RELIGIONS DE JOSÉ EDUARDO PORCHER

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Philosophy of religion is an ambivalent discipline since it can take either a descriptive or a normative stance. When it takes the normative stance, philosophy of religion shows its roots in metaphysics or even in systematic theology; when, instead, its interest is in describing religious phenomena, it shows the influence of social sciences, such as history, cultural anthropology, psychology and sociology. Properly speaking, “philosophy of religion” in Western philosophical landscape appears with Modernity. In Antiquity, the discourses on God were part of metaphysics: *theo-logy* was another name for “first philosophy” (*πρώτη φιλοσοφία*), as Aristotle evinced. Most times, the examination of religion as a particular and historical expression of relating to the Divine took place within the frame of apologetics or of the affirmation of the privilege of Christian thought: during the first centuries of Christianity, the Apologists, first, and then the Fathers of the Church, were especially concerned with showing the rationality of their faith and, even more, the access to the plenitude of truth in contrast to the other religions, especially those who believed in more than one god. Christian theology was born from the marriage of the Revelation of Christ and of Greek philosophy, which displayed already a tension between theology and mythology: the Greek word *theologia* appears for the first time in Plato's *Republic*, and it was coined with a polemic intention, for Plato uses it to discard those narratives that were not fair concerning the nature of the Divine. The main characteristic of the theological God was to be One, and not many. This claim had a paramount role in understanding both the cosmos and the Humane, for everything that exists is somehow ordered and related to the One God—the idea of Good—and within the Divine there are no inner struggles nor divisions, but pure peace: this image of the One, perfectly good, eternal God, was the proper one to found the new Republic, for men will try to imitate these divine features, and not those ambiguous and vicious characteristics of the mythological gods, who were in perpetual conflict among themselves, and were far from being fair or just. In other words, theology is not just a discourse depending on metaphysics, but also on politics. If the cosmos is to be thought as an *uni-verse*, and as a well-ordered totality, a plurality of governing principles should be avoided, and the affirmation of a unique divine principle is needed: monarchy is the essence of metaphysics.

Christian theology made the decision to make monarchy its principal claim: God is the Father Almighty, the One and sole sovereign that rules over everything and everyone. The concept of *creatio ex nihilo* is radically dependent on the political affirmation of God's monarchy, for there is no other principle other than God to explain cosmos. However, Christian theology affirms God as being the sole Sovereign, not only because He is at the absolute beginning of creation, but because He is also the absolute end of history

Christian monarchism, however, concerns not only God as the sole Sovereign, but also the Church as the one People of God. Christian monarchical theology, therefore, entails the conceptual series of One God–One World–One Church. The political organization of the Church entails unity, not only concerning the divine, but also concerning the means by which God reigns over human beings, those means that are administrated solely by the one true Church. This political interest in establishing unity has an imperial nature, for, on the one hand, all the particular Christian communities should be aligned to the One Church, as if they were colonies of the capital city, and, on the other hand, because the whole world should convert to the one true religion that is to be found in the one true Church, the one that is the only true minister of God in Earth. Everything concerning God is to be administrated and regulated by the one Church

This very short reflection on Christian monarchic monotheism sheds light on the main ideas concerning the nature of Western philosophy of religion and explains its incapacity to understand and examine properly other types of religious experiences. The complex system of Afro-Brazilian religions entails a variety of gods and spiritual entities that play a paramount role in the history of humanity and in the origins of the world, and the idea of monotheism is not as clear and strong as in Judeo-Christian traditions, as José Eduardo Porcher (2025a, sec. 2; 2025b) makes abundantly clear. Partially due to this polytheistic nature, these religions are neglected by philosophy of religion and are even considered to be a kind of underdeveloped religious experience, one that did not reach yet a theology. Even more, since in these traditions there is no "orthodoxy", no central authority, not even a canon of written texts, the very idea of theology is at least problematic, for theology usually entails the will to construct a rational system that comprehends the religious myths and rituals. Since Western philosophy of religion is bound to theology through metaphysics, the lack of a theological reflection is seen as a sign of inferiority.

I would claim that the main problem concerning Candomblé is the nature of its God, or Supreme Being. Both terms are foreign to this Afro-Brazilian religion and has already a strong metaphysical meaning: equating Olodumare with "God" or with "Supreme Being" is problematic and reveals the paradigm from which this religion is being examined. But this is how Porcher decides to call it, mainly because he will engage in philosophy of religion discussions, which examines every religion through the Western metaphysical scope. Closer to the Greek *mythology* than to Greek *theology*, Olodumare is a "limited god", one that is not perfectly good, but morally ambivalent (Porcher, 2024, ch. 2). In the Yoruba mythology, Olodumare resides in the higher spiritual realm with the other three higher gods, whereas all other

deities resides in the lower one, closer to the earth; however, Olodumare seems to be the supreme and unfathomable god, the one to which human beings cannot even connect directly to (and this is why there are no shrines or sacrifices dedicated to Olodumare). This typology is picturing a hierarchical scheme of gods, demons, and ancestors, to which human beings and the Yoruba people connect with through their rites and sacrifices. Porcher reviews the discussions in interpreting Candomblé and Olodumare within a Western paradigm, and how some scholars are trying to decolonize African philosophy of religion, while others are making efforts to show the “consistency” of Candomblé in bringing its narratives closer to the metaphysical principles of Christian theology, which can be summed up with the idea of an omniGod.

Within these omni-properties, the most important one is omnipotence. As I have argued, Greek theology is monotheistic, that is, monarchical, and the Christian tradition made of God's monarchy its highest and most unquestionable theological principle. In Olodumare's case, we have two main problems. On the one hand, it seems that Olodumare is not omnipotent, because Olodumare is not the *creator ex nihilo* of the world: Olodumare fashions the world using preexisting materials, and therefore Olodumare is not omnipotent because Olodumare is still bound in their activity to the materiality of the world on which Olodumare is acting. On the other hand, Olodumare is not alone in governing the world, for there are other higher deities that rule over human affairs: one could think of Olodumare not as the “supreme being”, but as the “first among equals” (Porcher, 2025, p. 14). Hence, omnipotence cannot be said of Olodumare in strict sense, mainly if we recall that the term omnipotent comes from the Latin *omnipotens*, which is the translation of the Greek *pantokrator*: Allmighty does not mean that God can do whatever God wants to (that is just a logical corollary), but that God rules (*kratein*) indisputably over everything (*pantos*). Christian monarchism is radical because no other god nor principle (such as matter) can resist or disobey God's power: everything that is not God is subjected to God. Also, the concept of transcendence is only meaningful within this monarchic scheme, for God rules over everything because God is not ruled by nothing. Only in this political-metaphysical frame we can find the classical problem of evil, which Leibniz calls *theodicy*, because the real problem is how an omnipotent and perfectly good God can create a world where evil exist. The problem is not evil, but God. We can find in Thomas Aquinas that one of the two objections to the existence of God is the existence of evil, being the other the autonomy of the universe: both objections show the monarchic and political nature of Christian theology. Now, if Olodumare is not omnipotent, evil exists as the consequence of other forces working in the world.

However, and here we get to the second problem with Candomblé mythology, Olodumare is not perfectly good, but morally ambiguous: in other words, Olodumare is not omnibenevolent (that is, Olodumare doesn't always and only will the good: *omni-bene-volens*). This is unbearable to a theistic monotheistic and monarchic theology, for, if God is the one and sole Sovereign of the world and of history, we can only trust in God if God is absolutely just and fair and good. Christian hope is grounded in this unambiguous moral character of God. A perfect ruler should be perfectly good: they should keep their promises and should

not be driven by passions, but only by reason. God is a perfect ruler, because God is absolutely trustworthy and apathetic, that is, God is pure intellect, far from any desire or passion that could drive God away from justice. In other words, an arbitrary sovereign God is the worst nightmare for Christian theology, and, therefore, for Western philosophy of religion. If some philosophers of religion and theologians could question God's omnipotence, in the name of human freedom or of the world's own finite nature due to its material dimension, nobody has dared to put God's goodness into question. For a monarchical theology, that God is not omnipotent is not as important as God's moral perfection: one could think on God as struggling against other forces, but not think on God as being unjust, or arbitrary, or even a sadist. Olodumare is capable of both good and bad, using both for the good of their own ruling of the universe (much closer to human sovereigns who make use of the just and the unfair to keep the community under control).

Porcher claims, in examining the nature of Olodumare and its interpretation as a supreme being: "I aim to shed light on why certain philosophical dilemmas do *not* emerge within certain traditions, rather than trying to force them into the mold of classical problems formulated within predominantly theistic framework of most philosophy of religion" (Porcher, 2024, p. 11). Although I find his argument strong and convincing, I would claim that we need to understand the political nature of Western philosophy of religion, which is grounded on a monarchic theology. Only by doing so can we argue extensively on the hidden reasons why a religion such as Candomblé is considered to be *mythological*, and not *theologically* consistent, placing it as a barbaric or underrated religion. The need for a theology to inform a religion is just a rationalistic belief that reduce religion to understanding and misses the irreducible meanings that are articulated firstly by the rituals and the narratives, but also by the sacralization of spaces, times, objects, and even people. Western philosophy of religion is still trapped within a "theological paradigm", that is, a paradigm that examines religion through theology (that is, that understands religious experience through conceptual and systematic rational procedures), and that grounds the criteria to speak about God on the fundamental principles of Western metaphysics. In this sense, I agree with Porcher that it is paramount for philosophy of religion to be informed by ethnography and other social sciences, but I would even say that the problem is not the lack of attention to these disciplines, but blindness to religion as such: to be informed by these sciences is not enough to radically change the axiomatic and dogmatic position that philosophy of religion has taken. I would rather claim that philosophy of religion should not be informed, but "transformed" by these disciplines. This transformation is possible because only by reflecting on the historically, culturally and politically construed nature of philosophy of religion can we begin to deconstruct its metaphysical presuppositions—or more precisely, its definition as metaphysics. If philosophy of religion is taken to be a subdiscipline of metaphysics, and is understood as philosophical theology, then there is no way to consider religion but as an inferior expression of the truth on God and will consider myths and narratives as being an imperfect formulation of the true religion, that is, essentially, a rational theological system. Only acknowledging that this belief is just a part of a

historical paradigm can philosophy of religion move forward by criticizing its blindness. The importance of social sciences and ethnography in particular is not just to give more information or to oblige to change perspectives and categories in order to understand religious experiences, but mainly to put into question the naturalized assumptions of philosophy of religion.

However, this theological paradigm is also (and mainly) a political one. Due to the imperialistic tendency of both Western civilization and of Christian Church (which also worked together during many centuries and it is only now slowly falling apart), the metaphysical nature of philosophy of religion is bound to its monarchic will: there is one God that is understood by a unique reason (that is an image of this divine unity) and that is fully represented by a true religion, incarnated in a universal Church. In this perspective, every religion that is strange to this monarchic scheme is either a menace (the case with Islam is clear) or something inferior that should be considered as archaic. Hence, it is not just an epistemological challenge, but a political decision to separate philosophy of religion from theology. Only if we are able to undergo this theological-political deconstruction will philosophy of religion flourish and become sensitive in its explorations of all religious experiences.

REFERENCES

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