

Article

Drugs and Religion: Contributions to the Debate on the Science–Religion Interface

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Abstract: In this article, we present the results of our research, which aims to comprehend how the relationship between religion and the use of drugs operates in various contexts, but especially in the context of a prohibitionist paradigm. On the one hand, the story of human religious worship entails drug use, and on the other hand, religious groups form a set of important protagonists in the current “drug problem”, whether as moral agents or direct action activists (individual or community-based), and above all in close contact with the users. In one of these studies, we evaluated the public presence of Brazilian religions that use psychoactive substances ritually, and we verify that in the State’s regulatory process of this use, the presence of the scientific reference was a defining factor in the creation of public policies, and therefore, within the scope of civil rights for religious freedom. In another study, we evaluated the discourse of twenty religious leaders in the city of Natal, Rio Grande do Norte—Brazil about drug use. We perceived that they have, in general, three stances: pure and simple condemnation, with no corresponding action in the public sphere; the use of substances considered drugs, along with public actions focused on the effort to gain acceptance of this practice; and finally, “comprehensive” condemnation, with frequent public group action or rehabilitation centers. Scientific references, in this study, permeate the discourse as an authenticating force in the religious speech. Ultimately, this reality allows us to question how the academic discourse unfolds in the scope of religion, interfering in the quality and intensity of its actions with relation to drugs, and we conclude that academic posture, often underestimated with relation to the religious institutions, does not aid in the effort to confront the social problems linked to drug abuse. Therefore, an increased interaction between academia and these institutions can generate a new approach to this very serious social problem in Brazil.

Keywords: drugs; religion and drugs; science and religion

1. Introduction

Currently, the use of drugs is widely recognized as a serious problem on a worldwide scale, as the relationship of this phenomenon among people, groups, and institutions frequently produce dramatic outcomes with disruptive social effects. In reality, the groups and institutions seem to be largely responsible for these consequences, since from the total rate of individual consumption, the set of abusers represents just a small portion. For Brazilians, one of these dramatic outcomes is the institutionalization of hyperincarceration; another is the extreme marginalization experienced by drug users with regard to social equipment and safety in the cities. Added to this are the creation of organized crime by groups of drug dealers related to political corruption, the militia, and the violation of human rights, together constituting a second military power.

Within this scenario, religious groups have played different roles, showing that their situation is not limited to the private sphere of individual lives. Many of these groups have express initiatives in

the form of therapeutic communities, assistance groups, and drug policy lobbies, even influencing dealers to use violence against African-based religions. In other words, the religious groups may fuel the inter-religious conflict through power gained by selling drugs, as outlined in *Oração de traficante: uma etnografia* (The dealer's prayer: an ethnography), by researcher Christina Vital da Cunha (2015).

In the research we have developed since 2014, we have found that religious groups are frequent actors in the daily life of individuals, and there is evidence that the religious dimension performs exchanges with scientific and political life within social spheres (Lopes 2013; Costa and Lopes 2014; Costa and Simeão 2015; Costa 2017). With these findings, we aim to comprehend these interactions as exchanges, mimicry, and oppositions that blur the boundaries between the specialized spheres established by the disjunctive scientific perspective. An example of this is how the religious use of *ayahuasca* in Brazil has been legislated. The petition for the use of drugs by religious groups has had, in some way, an effect on the national drug policy, creating a small crack in the local hermetic prohibition. As a concession, the participants of the Brazilian *ayahuasca* religious groups agreed, in this process, to separate the notion of curing the physical body from the notion of spiritual salvation, aiming to adjust the bureaucratic requirements for state standardization (Costa and Lopes 2014; Costa 2015). In another study (Costa and Simeão 2015; Simeão 2017), we found in the discourse of the religious leadership of Natal/RN/Brazil a series of references to scientific truths, such as vice and dependence, along with the adoption of a vision focused on the substance as the cause of all the problems drug users experience, disregarding the individual and their life context. This is the predominant discourse of health professionals and academics, as well as the focus of the state's repressive policies, as they frame the problem judicially. We see that the criminalization of the possession of drugs is constituted in a single penal chapter, because it punishes the anticipated consummation of the crime, before even proving any damage to oneself or another. In other words, the State's intention, above all else, is to eliminate the substance.

We assert that interactions such as these demonstrate that the famed "drug problem" is constituted historically through innumerable intersections—or rather, that it is configured in time and space, through social interactions permeated with asymmetries of power that define its contours, contradictions, and vitality. In the following, we provide a brief explanation about this configuration, regarding the incidences of the dimensions of life that concern us.

The word "drug" holds a prominent place in this conflict, and the meanings that it encompasses during the framing and consolidation of the "drug problem" in the last century portray the predominate ideas in the fight for meaning. In the current scene, this word is used in the common sense as a synonym for something bad, and the illicitness determined by the state has enormous weight on the definition of this concept. The justification for this state interdict is based on the idea that prohibited substances represent a danger to individual and collective health and safety; thus, it is supposed that the governments, before adopting such measures, produce knowledge related to the risks of each element based on practical experience and science, evaluating measures to avoid these risks and carrying out these measures. This is a sweet illusion. The Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971 of the United Nations advises the illicitness adopted by the signatory countries occur as a demonstration of alignment with the international system and adhesion to a paradigm, as a way of installing a top-down policy. The alliance between the political and medical-scientific discourse on this point is latent, and is summarized in the equation: substances that jeopardize physical well-being and disrupt the psyche need to be controlled by the state. However, despite being necessary to legitimize the actions of the modern nation-states regarding bodies, this equation is faulty. A contradiction was then created, as there is no research or medical safety guidelines, as they are prohibited (research included), and access to the substances that have become designated as illicit are extremely limited (Courtwright 2002; Fernandes 2008; UNODC 2015).

It seems to us that the definition of what is licit and what is illicit with regard to the substance of drugs is characterized by criteria that rely on a "moral stance" more than the rational logic the definition professes. Throughout history, we find the word "drug" being mobilized, primarily to designate a

broad and diversified quantity of elements of natural origins, and also used to describe feeding practices and in budding modern pharmacopoeia (Carneiro 2005a, 2008; Escotado 2008, 2015). The use of this word became increasingly popular, insofar as Europeans intensified contact with other peoples, primarily Arabic, Hindi, and later, Native American (Vargas 2000). This contact was guided specifically by aspects concerning religious life, such as the Crusades, the Catholic and Protestant ethic in the installation of the so-called civilizing process, and the forced Christian catechism during the conquest of the Americas. These movements would have influenced, in a particular way, a “topographic-cosmological upturn” in search of Paradise on Earth, which was manifested in the conquest of marketing exotic products that could provide the sensation of Paradise and, consequently, the conquest of new borders. The word “drug” then could refer to cinnamon, clove, saffron, ginger, nutmeg, opium, or hashish, as well as sugar, coffee, tea, chocolate, and tobacco. However, the vision of paradise on Earth came accompanied by its counterpoint, a vision of hell, which was the fundamental reason for the retrenchment of the morally unacceptable, and for the progressive honing of the meaning and the use of this word (p. 42).

From the time the circle of the world was closed, after the “discoveries”, the colonial empires controlled the production, use, and access to the most diverse drugs, not only with their sights on economic interests, but also envisioning dominion over the imagination and the body, a task that was mainly performed by the Inquisition. Two emblematic cases of the arrangements promoted among these interests are alcohol and tobacco. The wide use of tobacco among Amerindians and Europeans was initially condemned by the Catholic Church, because it engendered “insidious fictions”. The Spanish empire, meanwhile, even though it was allied with the Church and supported the principle of this condemnation, on finding the rapid dissemination of the habit of smoking and the possibilities of profit of this practice, instituted the first tax on tobacco on the planet in 1611, and declared a monopoly on the cigarette. The Inquisition tried to control the practice, decreeing punishments such as amputation of the nose and imprisonment. In 1642, Urbano VII prohibited that any person of the diocese of Sevilla—a port of entry for tobacco in Europe—consume the plant, under the threat of being excommunicated. However, despite this, in a very short time the Spanish had to cede to the desire for smoking (Carneiro 2004; Escotado 2008, p. 255).

The constitution of the cultural material and the modern psychic model was strongly influenced by the relationship with drugs. The increase in tobacco consumption around the globe, for example, was in large part determined by the “sedative from tension” effects and the “livening up of the attention” characteristic of the vegetal species smoked, which were in sync with the civilizing dynamics. The adjustments within the interests of particular religious groups (Catholics and Protestants), with their moral references and the project of the secular state, went through negotiations on both good and bad drugs, and how these meanings were impressed on people and distributed among them, such that they would figure into the roots of the demarcation of otherness (Carneiro 2004).

Among these adjustments, there was an important point of congruence among the religious and political dimensions; after the Counterreformation, the mutual collaboration between the absolutist and Christian state, which had already been forming for centuries as an internalization of social controls on the body and the spirit, made possible the installation of

[...] a disciplinary policing of customs with resources to refine the model of modern subjectivity with an ironclad structure of moral automations, of shields over the spirit, to forge an anti-ecstatic mentality through a demonizing symbolization of the practices such as the witches Sabbath or the wild cannibal feast (Carneiro 2008, pp. 70–71).¹

¹ In Portuguese: [...] um policiamento disciplinar dos costumes com recursos para refinar o modelo de subjetividade moderno com uma férrea estrutura de automatismos morais, de couraças sobre o espírito, para forjar uma mentalidade anti-extática, por meio de uma simbolização demonizante das práticas extáticas como sabá de bruxas ou festim canibal de selvagens (Carneiro 2008, pp. 70–71).

In this context, the consumption of alcohol occupied a central place in the modern social organization, as a Christian inheritance from Judaism, while other psychoactive substances were interpreted through the symbolic matrix of the forbidden fruit. This matrix is what justified that inquisitorial action was strongly invested against the Dionysian and shamanic legacies, and in combatting the cults of sacred psychoactive plants all over the continents (Carneiro 2008, p. 75). Alcohol was so important for the dominion of European life, wine above all, that it partly determined the victory over the Ottoman Empire, as alcohol figured as a determining factor in the battlefields and the long journey of recapture. Alcohol was more durable than the water transported for the troupes, remedied the pain and fatigue of the fighters, and even figured in sacred battle rites (Crowley 2014).

In search of a cultural uniformity characteristic of the burgeoning nation-states, first the colonialist enterprise and then independent nations condemned certain practices of drug use. Just as in the oral narrative, the “extirpaters of idolatry” identified psychoactive plants, traditionally used by the conquered peoples as a focus of resistance to the conversion to the Christian faith and the refusal to submit to the power of the monarchy. The extirpaters of idolatry understood that the psychoactive substances were constituted as a cultural vehicle for transmission and continuity of an oneiric universe on the margins. For this, they sought to classify the plants’ forms, effects, and intentions of use, singularly aiming to abolish this “infernal superstition” (Bernand and Gruzinski 1992, p. 143).

While the mechanisms by which the drugs act are undisclosed and controlled, these substances remained a threat, and possibly a mystery. The use of psychoactive drugs, which alter the perception of the reality of whoever uses them, is a ubiquitous phenomenon—or rather, is present in all cultures and times (Carneiro 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2008). Throughout human evolution, the experimentation with these types of drugs and the generation of knowledge about them has been part of the development of food practices. Exploiting the immense and unknown natural offerings, proto-human food practices included psychoactive components such as psilocybin, dimethyltryptamine, and harmaline, potent chemical elements that can be considered proponents of human self-awareness, imagination, language, and religion (Mckenna 1993, p. 45).

The effect of the use of psychoactive plants can have functioned as hierophany—manifestations of the sacred—once the surprise, shock, and the absence of a satisfactory explanation of this type of experience conducted man to a position of fear combined with veneration. The hierophany would consecrate the fraction of the space-time of the plants’ use, and deliberate repetition would assure the survival of this sacredness for the future. Soon, the rites developed around this repetition becoming a source of its strength and sacredness. Death exerts a similar function, and it is not by chance that diverse cults linked to the use of these so-called power, teaching, or entheogenic (divine within) plants, are considered ways of communicating with the dead (Eliade 2010, pp. 2–39). “The sacred potential simultaneously means time, reality, perennial character and efficiency” (Eliade 2010, p. 296)², but we can note that the drugs were losing this potential in the face of their scientific explanation and the moral and political–institutional control.

The progression of forced conversion to Christianity generated, on a global scale, the increased separation of man from elements of nature, such as corn, tobacco, chocolate, and cannabis from the metaphysical conceptions of the Amerindian and African cosmos, which stripped these natural elements of their sacred force and transformed them into market commodities (Gruzinski 2001, pp. 83, 84, 106). In this way, the persistence in treating these elements as sacred went on to be seen pejoratively as magic. The persistence in the traditional therapeutic use of these natural elements was classified as folk healing, and the substance itself, when it was not of interest to the economy or the modern psychic regiments, was classified as poison, as in the example of cannabis.

Death, in some way, also lost this sacred potential, due to the intermediation of medicine, the hospital, the priest, and the funerary market. In this trajectory, the fact that the phenomenon of

² In the Portuguese: “A potência sagrada quer dizer ao mesmo tempo, realidade, perenidade e eficácia” (Eliade 2010, p. 296).

the use of drugs is present in every time period and every culture, despite being a characteristic of religious phenomenon, suffered an erasure, above all in the past century with the “war on drugs”. Even under intense repression, however, thousands of people seek out drugs annually, whether licit or illicit. Many of these people develop substance abuse problems, precisely because of a persistent prohibition on talking or educating about this practice. Caring for people suffering from substance abuse with these natural elements is also prohibited by criminalization.

Based on rigorous anthropological research of crack consumers, Taniele Rui (Adorno et al. 2014) verifies that almost all of those interviewed related having trajectories of intense “social suffering”, in which they saw themselves separated from their social and affective ties, as well as progressively distanced from the forms of recognition by the hegemonic social group. Substance abuse, meanwhile, was a common point around which they could come closer to other users, the group generating its own rules of survival and creating its own territories—*cracolândia*—crack houses. We can conjecture that this type of mobilization, through chemical ecstasy and its relative numbing interactions, in this case was configured as a search for a type of escape, a will for such, perhaps reminiscent of an ancestral practice of self-medication. According to the theologian Friar Betto, “every drug addict is a potential mystic” (Betto 2013).

Finally, we assert that the phenomenon of drug use occupies a central place in the organization of human groups, interwoven into the dimensions of the production of knowledge, religious worship, and the *comunis*. Therefore, we can say that science and religion meet in a common space when the theme is the “drug problem”. Our objective in the reflection presented here is to identify and analyze the exchanges and contagions held within these dimensions.

2. Theoretical/Conceptual Basis

Our perspective follows Latour (2004), Sloterdijk (2009), and Simmel (2011a, 2011b), regarding the indiscriminate use of the concept of religion. This perspective presumes that this use would produce a forced framing, inasmuch as that which would design a universal religious form, given certain factors concerning the design of rituals, beliefs, and gods in the face of a mutating reality, filled with differentiations and loans between groups and their sets of beliefs. Soon, we avoid the application of *Procrustean*³ concepts, and deal with the phenomenon, considering it based on an interactionist perspective (Simmel 2011a, 2011b) and “anthropotechnics” (Sloterdijk 2009). We seek to envision a creative dimension of relationships whose borders are defined by their own members and their discourses, which fuel the specific climate with regard to the absent (dead) and the transcendent.

Breaking with the classical sociological concept of society as an organic totality comprised of specialized spheres of life, Peter Sloterdijk (2009) has compared the injunction of human groups that we call society to a foam, which is composed of innumerable micro-spheres (couples, homes, associations, institutions, companies, and other groups). Among these, there is co-isolation, where mimetic infiltrations of norms, stimuli, markets, and symbols occur. These anthropotechnical, spheres, or island spaces, exist in this perspective through “anthropotechnique” activities, formed by the interactions of every type, which feed the contagion and the immunization between people and groups, thus creating atmospheric climates that maintain the bubbles. This climatic activity would pass for new basic dimensions, of which we can highlight the truth and memory dimension, defined as *alethotopo*, the dimension of contact with ancestors of the group; “revelation” (hierophancy); *thanatotopo*; and the environment of *nomotopo*, of common customs, division of labor, and reciprocal expectations, which form an imaginary tensegrity in parts, which could then be compared to the state’s institutional

³ *Procrustean* refers to concepts that adapt the reality of their own limits. Lopes (2013) establishes an analogy between the disjunctive and mutilating form of thought in the modern scientific paradigm and the attitude of the cruel assailant *Procrustes* portrayed in Greek mythology, who laid his victims on two beds, cut the parts that surpassed this measure, and extended those that did not reach the measure.

character (Sloterdijk 2009, pp. 15–60)⁴. The acclimatization draws boundaries between the bubbles, from the biochemical, military, political, psycho-semantic, and religious categories. The identity discourse, for example, mobilizes these categories to delimit contact and promote the immunity of the group to possible threats to its survival.

This line of reasoning considers the religious groups not as closed spheres in their specialization, but rather as human groups that denote in their lives the dimension *thanatotopo*—but which also are crossed by all the dimensions of life, which are dynamic (anthropotechnic) and subject to diverse interactions. For Sloterdijk, cults are psychosocial institutions that coordinate the attempts to regulate the traffic of the dead with the world: “When the dead are presented in an orderly fashion, one speaks of a cult; when there is an unregulated apparition, one speaks of a ghost” (Sloterdijk 2009, p. 250).⁵

The people who are, according to Simmel (2011a), the religious caretakers move the cults and rites corresponding to these, a “disposition of the soul” which colors the contents of the world creating the religion. The concrete and conceptual reality thus functions as a substrate of the tensions, facets, and synthesis of the religious world. “The concepts of soul and existence, destiny, guilt, happiness and sacrifice reaching the hair on our head and even the sparrow on the roof—all of this also constitutes the content of the religious world” (Simmel 2011a, pp. 24–25).⁶

The religious atmosphere created by the actions of the religious man redeems the tensions when faced with death, and transforms the *chaos* into *cosmos* (Simmel 2011a):

The religious phenomenon in its specific essence, in its pure existence, free from “everything” empirical, is life; religious man lives in such a way that he is himself and his psychic processes present a rhythm, a tonality, an arrangement and a proportion of psychic energies that are clearly distinct from the theoretical, artistic or practical man. But all of this is just a question of process and not concrete education: this life and this operation must cover the real content and educate them so that descriptive and “objective” religions were born (Simmel 2011a, p. 27).⁷

The religious proclaim their truths and, according to Latour (2004), the performance of this utterance that represents good news generates a transformative experience in those who hear it—moving, thus, the manner of inhabiting space and time. To explain this flux of approximation, present time, and transformation, the author relies on the model of the amorous interpellations as an analogy, due to the three main aspects: the exchange of information with transformation of those who exchange the message, sensibility to transit between absent and present (re-present), and a discourse that is completely common—while also being complex—but almost never described in detail (Latour 2004, pp. 353–54).

The religious discourse, according to Latour (2004), by representing relives, and this is similar to the contagions of the *thanatotopo* dimension described by Sloterdijk (2009). The world of life of any human group has its world of absents; the latent emergency of new truths and the affections of the dead are the two great sources of contagion of these absent ones, who maintain daily life in stress. The gods and the constant treaties with them keep stress under control, and the rites are constituted

⁴ In the Portuguese: As outras seis dimensões são: quirotopo: dimensão da ação das manipulações objetivas; fonotopo: dimensão da comunicação sonora; uterotopo: dimensão do sentimento de pertencimento; termotopo: dimensão do conforto; erototopo: dimensão da troca primária de energias eróticas e de ciúmes; ergotopo: dimensão da força patriarcal geradora de unidade via trabalho e guerra.

⁵ In the Portuguese: “Quando os mortos são apresentados de modo ordenado, se fala de culto; quando se observa sua aparição desregulada, se fala de um fantasma” (Sloterdijk 2009, p. 250).

⁶ In the Portuguese: “Os conceitos de alma e existência, destino, culpa, felicidade e sacrifício chegando até os cabelos de nossa cabeça e até o pardal no telhado—tudo isso também constitui o conteúdo do mundo religioso” (Simmel 2011a, pp. 24–25).

⁷ In the Portuguese: “O fenômeno religioso em sua essência específica, em sua existência pura, livre de toda “coisa” empírica, é vida; o homem religioso vive de uma maneira que lhe é própria e seus processos psíquicos apresentam um ritmo, uma tonalidade, um arranjo e uma proporção de energias psíquicas que são claramente distintos daqueles do homem teórico, artístico ou prático. Mas tudo isso é justamente uma questão de processo e não uma formação concreta: essa vida e essa operação devem abranger os conteúdos reais e formá-los—caso religiões descritivas e ‘objetivas’ vierem a nascer” (Simmel 2011a, p. 27).

within the immunization of the groups. The religious group, their proponents, and their leaders then become mediators of the immunization, and each religious man who lives in his own way reproduces immunizations techniques.

If, on the other hand, the psychoactive substances represent in some way the return of the absent, it is sometimes in an uncontrolled and threatening way, because we know little about how they work and because they reveal surprising realities. In this case, it is understandable why people seek out religious groups to resolve their difficulties in relation to drugs, and that religions offer solutions, typically viewed as miraculous, for problematic situations.

3. Methodology

The method of this research is characterized as a critical literature review of primary and secondary sources and fieldwork, which included the carrying out of interviews of religious leaders through questionnaires. Given the previous description of the theoretical basis on which this research was based, the people who form the religious groups were characterized through their actions, defining the dogmas and the borders between them and others. The leaders of these groups, as well as those who fulfill some kind of institutional function, were presented in general as people of greater influence, with regards to the definition of the religious climate and the exchanges with the other dimensions of life. For these reasons, they were chosen to be interviewed.

The interviews brought elements for our reflection about the interaction between the major anthropotechnical dimensions. We could enlist the normativity expressed in state ordering, the search for the truth expressed in science, and the relationship with the absent expressed in the religious groups. The interviews were carried out along two research lines (Costa 2015; Simeão 2017). In one of these lines of research (Costa 2015), we conducted four interviews based on a methodology that we designated “detonators of memory”: the religious leaders of the second-largest *ayahuasca* religion, and the most controversial of them, the so-called *Santo Daimé* (Iceflu) religion, whose groups and temples are found present in every state of Brazil and various other countries on all of the continents. This methodology consisted of presenting those interviewed with fragments of registers about their religious lives, and asking them to verbally express what memory elicits these fragments. The *Santo Daimé* group had a significant presence in the process of regulating the ritual use of *ayahuasca*, often participating in scientific experiments from the perspective of health professionals, especially mental health, but also figuring as protagonists in discussions in which important decisions are made. In an interview for this research, we show a religious leader an excerpt from a video recording, done by the first commission of the investigation into the use of the drink established at the beginning of the 1980s, in which ritual scenes appear that the community would have “presented” to the investigators. The interviewee commented: “that’s it, we really presented!”, emphasizing a relationship with the intervention of the public power, in the sense of winning its recognition by performing their religious discourse in search of elements of contact in the eyes of the state, through the petition for the right to be different. It is interesting to note the force of this discourse, present in the act of “conversion” of one of the series of participants of the investigating commission, which, as Alex Polari mentions (Costa 2012), went to study and ended up being studied. We see, thus, that this method unveils interesting aspects about the interchanges. In another study (Simeão 2017), the field for the data collection was widened to include a greater number of interviewed religious leaders, and consequently, the number of religious groups represented. In this case, we use a qualitative interview method, based on two direct questions, as follows: How does the (name of the institution) conceive of the “drug problem”? How does (name of the institution) relate to the “drug problem”. Leaders from 20 groups (Table 1) in Natal/RN/Brazil were interviewed.

Table 1. Religious groups researched Natal/RN/2014–2015.

1.	Roman Catholic Apostolic Church
2.	Quadrangular Evangelical Church
3.	IRegular Baptist Evangelical Church
4.	Conventional Baptist Church
5.	Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Brazil
6.	Evangelical Assembly of God Church
7.	Evangelical Christian Congregation in Brazil Church
8.	Evangelical God is Love Church
9.	Igreja Evangélica Bola de Neve Church
10.	Universal Church of the Kingdom of God – IURD
11.	Jesus Christ of the Saints of the Final days Church
12.	Seventh Day Adventist Church
13.	Santo Daime
14.	Spiritist Federation of Rio Grande Do Norte
15.	Spiritist Federation of Umbanda, Candomblé and Jurema
16.	Hare Krishina
17.	Buddhism
18.	Candomblé
19.	Muslim Community of Rio Grande do Norte
20.	Christian Community of Marvelous Grace

In the empirical plan, we identify the presence of a great diversity of religious denominations that judge themselves as capable of taking a position on the drug issue, about which we comment in the following section.

4. Analysis and Discussion of Data

The so-called “drug problem”, a burning public issue given its intense sway, ends up playing a role in religious activities, since religions in general propose to placate the pain of the world and form a community that includes everyone, and these activities are not framed in the limits given by what theoretically is conceived of as private life. Thus, even though many times the religious exponents evidently do not have any knowledge about the issue, besides practical common sense and their dogmatic vision, they always risk some position with regard to the phenomenon of drug use. We believe that this is due to the penetration of the moral panic generated by the official discourse of prohibition, and the fact that the roots of this paradigm are combined with the Christian interests in the colonization of the imaginary, turning the drug question into both a public issue and a religious one. We call attention on new works on the theme, [Cohen \(2003\)](#) and [Seddon \(2016\)](#)—we could not discuss them here, but they will help to deeper this discussion.

During the research on the religious leaders of Natal and their perspective of the drug issue, we identified some common points in the discourse of representatives of different Protestant branches. For example, the representatives reference their religious presence in remote places of the city, which have poor access and precarious social conditions, as a way of offering a type of support for the “recovery” of the people using drugs, and the “support” for their families. This became very evident in the speech of the leader of the Assembly of God:

[...] firstly, the Assembly of God does work, has congregations, and church services in every neighborhood in Natal. [...] And so, dealing with other communities where you don’t have the presence of drugs like crack and marijuana, but where there is a lot of alcoholism, and smoking and . . . then the church is always advising in this sense and present in these

communities, the work of the church has been very efficient in taking people off... off the path of drug use. [...]⁸

Within the resentment of the qualitative evaluation we can make about the type of intervention offered by these groups, we realize that the evangelical dispersion guarantees, in these cases, that there is in these locations at least an institutional and proactive discourse on drugs. Soon, however, that discourse strays from being particularly focused on this proactivity, and the religious public presence regarding the drug issue only occurs insofar as it offers an explanation for and a solution to the social problem of drugs, or a *sacred dossel* (Berger 1985). An interesting expression used by one of those interviewed from the Christian Evangelical Congregation in Brazil said the following: “Drug, the name says it all (laughingly) so . . . ”; showing its adherence to the typical utterances that irremediably associate drugs as something bad—a sin. These data are important for thinking about how academics can dialogue with these instances, aiming perhaps to update the paradigm of the drugs together with these groups and their communities.

From the point of view of the exponents of the neo-Pentecostalism, such as the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, the “vice” is configured as a spiritual illness that requires treatment. They propose a kind of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) 12-step program, in order to abandon the vice, adopting seven-step instructions outlined in a church service called “A cure for vice in Natal”. These steps include:

Surrender entirely to Jesus; ask for the presence and the constant guidance of the Holy Spirit; do not abandon the treatment of the cure for vice; Obedience; Sayings and Offerings; prayer and fasting as a way of fearing God and finally to say “no” to the temptations of the world.⁹

We note that the tendency of the neo-Pentecostal discourse is to radicalize the relationship between the use of the substance and the religiosity, because the cure seems dependent on total abstinence as a result of the obedient adoption of the indicated religious behavior. Meanwhile, any proximity with illicit drugs means dealing with the devil. The fact that, from this point of view, the temptation of the drugs is linked to the actions of maleficent spirits produces a zone of uncertainty and, consequently, imminent danger and the threat that the service proposes to control. This program, despite being critical of AA, has some similarities to it, in the way it confronts substance abuse as being a chronic illness, for which there is no cure, and demands in this way the daily fulfillment of a “rite of sobriety”. Both groups thus forego medical categories, such as vice and illness, to justify an intervention that is characterized as being of another order, configured as an alternative to the hegemonic biomedical model, but also anchored in it.

The guy last week came here and drank water, didn’t he? But he got drunk, almost falling over, aren’t I right? That’s the spirit! It’s not enough to just come to Church, make ties, the treatment is more than necessary. You see that everything the Devil does to divert your attention, so you get distracted. The treatment is only going to work if you obey. (Representative of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God).¹⁰

⁸ In Portuguese: [...] primeiro que a Igreja Assembleia de Deus ela tem trabalhos, congregações e cultos acontecendo em todos os bairros de Natal. [...] E aí em se tratando de outras comunidades mesmo onde você não tenha a presença da droga como o crack e a maconha, mas tem muita presença do alcoolismo, do fumo e ... então a igreja está sempre orientando neste sentido e presente dentro destas comunidade, o trabalho da igreja tem sido muito eficiente em tirar muita gente do vício, da ... do caminho da droga [...].

⁹ In Portuguese: Entregar-se por completo a Jesus; Pedir a presença e a condução constante do Espírito Santo; Não abandonar o tratamento da cura dos vícios; Obediência; Dízimos e Ofertas; oração e jejum como forma de ser temente a Deus e por fim dizer não as tentações do mundo.

¹⁰ In Portuguese: “O rapaz semana passada veio aqui e bebeu água, foi ou num foi? Mas ele ficou embriagado, quase caindo, num foi verdade? Isso é o espirito! Não adianta você só vir na Igreja, fazer correntes, o tratamento é mais que necessário. Você vê que tudo o que o Diabo faz para tirar sua atenção, para não prestar atenção. O tratamento só vai funcionar se você o obedecer” (Representante da IURD).

Accompanying the positions of the religious leaders of the city of Natal/RN on the “drug problem”, it appears to us that they take up three guiding directions: (1) the use of substances considered drugs and public action focused on acceptance of this practice; (2) “comprehensive” condemnation with the frequent action in the public space; and (3) simple condemnation, with a corresponding lack of action in the public sphere. According to the discourses presented up to this point, we can say that we encountered gradations within the second line of reasoning, with the Assembly of God assuming a proactive discourse of treatment to the problem of drugs, and the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD) in the community focused on a specific program and specialized intervention for said problem. Another example in this sense is the Catholic Church, which focused on a programmed action in the public space, offering a therapeutic community in the city called the Farm of Hope for the “treatment” of “addicts”. In a broader scheme of action than the others, this religious group still has the initiatives of the so-called “pastoral of sobriety”, which proposes for the Catholic community mutual help for the promotion of abstinence among those involved with the infamous problem:

The response to the problem of drugs on the part of the Catholic Church is the Pastoral da Sobriedade (Sobriety Ministry), which began in 1979, and was created precisely by the CNBB. The Ministry works with the person as a whole, see? From drugs to alcohol and other dependencies, but also anything that is a vice, that creates a dependency in that person, then he or she is invited to reflect, admit, and enter into a process of conversion, of change to seek out sobriety. It is a great expression of support, also the Catholic Church, and other churches as well, to care for the people that have drug problems are the therapeutic [...] Hope Farm, for example does this work of restoring the person’s dignity, there you talk the minimum possible about drugs, you talk about life... then during a year we work on converting the person, presenting Jesus Christ as the great riches he is and as the ideal in life (Representative of the Catholic Church).¹¹

Unfortunately, a more detailed consideration about the discursive positioning and consequent actions of the 20 groups interviewed is beyond the scope of this article. The examples cited here serve to illustrate the most common tendencies we identified, about which a consideration of the plasticity also becomes necessary, such as in the cases presented here. These cases make up a part of one common tendency, but with their own variations. Besides the position or tendency described here, we even have the pure condemnation of drug use combined with an absence of action taken in the public sphere, since the group identified did not offer an evaluation, more or less elaborate, of the problem being addressed and a solution to it. This approach was presented in the cases of the Conventional Baptist Church and the God is Love Church.

Finally, we identified a unique tendency in the set of participants studied, who are characterized by the use of psychoactive substances in the religious dimension combined with an action focused on the promotion of the understanding of this practice. The emblematic case in this sense is represented by Santo Daime, but also can be identified in the Spiritist Federation of Umbanda, Candomblé, and Jurema of the Rio Grande do Norte. We perceive, in the discourses of the representatives of these groups, an effort to differentiate religious consumption from the recreational consumption of substances, clearly asserting that the use according to determined rules can be beneficial. This performance is

¹¹ In Portuguese: A resposta ao problema das drogas da parte da Igreja Católica está com a Pastoral da Sobriedade, que desde 1979 existe, foi criada exatamente pela CNBB. A Pastoral trabalha a pessoa como um todo, né? Desde as drogas e o álcool e outras dependências, mas também tudo aquilo que é vício, que gera dependência da pessoa, então ela é convidada à refletir, admitir, e entrar num processo de conversão, de mudança para ir em busca da sobriedade. A grande expressão de amparo, também da Igreja Católica e, das outras igrejas também, para o cuidado com as pessoas que têm problema com as drogas são as comunidade terapêuticas [...] Fazenda da Esperança, por exemplo faz esse trabalho de restaurar a dignidade da pessoa, lá se fala o mínimo possível de droga, se fala de vida.. então durante um ano nós trabalhamos a conversão da pessoa, apresentando Jesus Cristo como a grande riqueza dele e como ideal de vida (Representante da Igreja Católica).

possibly due to the fact that the religious groups that consume substances, such as *ayahuasca*, *jurema*, and alcohol in their rituals suffer from much prejudice and condemnations on the part of the other groups due to this practice, and one of the most common accusations mobilized against them is that they are “junkies”.

What contributions does this discussion bring for what we are calling the science–religion interface? Firstly, it is necessary to underline that we are not talking about opposing worlds, but dimensions of life.

5. Final Considerations

In the dozens of interviews we carried out, the reference to “scientific discoveries” and “scientific aspects of treatment”, as well as the citation of “academic studies” was notorious. This is partly due to the fact that we always presented ourselves as university researchers, and on bringing up this supposed scientific knowledge as a reference the subjects were searching for points of dialogue, besides trying to demonstrate the *aggiornamento* (updating) of the religious discourse itself.

This attitude is extremely prevalent among groups that aspire to a partnership with the public agencies that serve drug addicts and their families, envisioning “healing and liberation”. In the same way, but for a different reason, this attitude was present among those who sought public recognition for sacramental use of psychoactive substances. Meanwhile, the more narrow-minded religious groups, generally those with a fundamentalist profile, did not make this link to science, although they did say: “even science agrees that...” In this last case, however, the supposed scientific arguments were there as a demonstration of the superiority of the dogma, since even science was seen to be forced to agree with it.

The first two cases in particular interest us here, as we see a typically modern science–religion interface, where a scientific authority is admitted as a reference for the religious practice. On the other hand, this serves as an invitation to science to reconsider the contributions that it can bring to the intense religious practice in the contemporary world, which is seen to be of immense capillarity. Maintaining the pharmacological and hygienist discourse in the health sciences, and psychiatric conventions, few creative practices will be developed in the sphere of religiosity, thus its actions in society will continue to be ineffective and oppressive. Science is not in the least bit neutral, and its presuppositions have ethical implications of immense repercussion. We are not referring to, however, opposing worlds, but co-combatant sectors focused on or for a war on drugs, or for the creative engagement for a solution to a common challenge (Lopes 2015).

On the other hand, there is a hidden side to this science–religion relationship that spurs the rebirth, inversely, of a moment in the history of the West in which Science is represented as in medieval times, especially by philosophy submitted to the Christian teleology, in a process that was then called “*encilhamento-mounting*” (Lopes 2013)—that is, a process in which religion needs to mount and ride with science to maintain its hegemonic position in society, using itself as a cage that was formerly science for this purpose.

This *encilhamento* logic represents itself inversely, as in this case science radiates its dominion over contemporary social thought through a new cell: religion. Both the *encilhamento* and the *neo-encilhamento* presuppose the effective inexistence of the other. The mutual instrumental use, evidently with a certain acquiescence, supposes the annihilation of the other, as a particular mode of its own that is valid to deal with the challenges of the human presence in the world. However, the use of science by religion as a source of authority for its acting in the world is a great trap that withdraws its specific contribution to the human problem. Certainly, that refusal to dialogue, as in the case of the isolationist stance of some groups, is not a solution. As we see, there is, even in these cases, an underlying reference to the superior authority of science, and a premise for the explicatory rationalism in dogmatic truths. As a possibility for a creative path to the solution, interaction is all that remains—the mutual discovery of the strengths and weaknesses of each sector in particular, and

the inter-pollination of ideas, without there being, to use an expression by Stephen Jay Gould (2002), the supremacy of magisterium one over the other.

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