



Exoticizing Terrorism

Religious Bias and the Unchecked Threat of Evangelical Christian Extremism in Brazil

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Abstract

Since the start of the 21st century, Brazil has been experiencing a rapidly escalating problem with Evangelical Christian extremism. Persons referring to themselves as “armies of Jesus” have been assaulting devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions—stealing and destroying their sacred artifacts, as well as burning and bombing their places of worship. Although Brazil recently passed some of the most expansive anti-terrorism legislation in the world, it has failed to hold Evangelical extremists accountable under these laws. This article explores how Brazil’s non-recognition of Evangelical extremism is part of a global trend to “exoticize” terrorists as a foreign, unfamiliar threat.

Keywords: terrorism, extremism, Brazil, Evangelical, Candomblé

Introduction

In August 2017, a video of an unidentified Candomblé priest (“*pai de santo*”) in Nova Iguaçu, Rio de Janeiro, began circulating on the popular messaging platform WhatsApp (on file with author). As the two-minute video begins, the *pai de santo* is standing in the middle of a pile of rubble—the remnants of what used to be a place of worship—and he is wearing a t-shirt with the face of Jesus on it. In his hands, he is holding dozens of *ilekes*—sacred, protective necklaces worn by devotees of Candomblé—and he is breaking them one by one. An off-camera voice shouts at him “É só um diálogo que eu tô tendo com vocês. Da próxima vez eu mato.” “This is just a dialogue that I am having with you. The next time, I kill.” While the off-

camera voice issues this threat, a bat appears in the corner of the screen, shaking in the direction of the *pai de santo*. The word “dialogue” is inscribed on the side of the bat that faces the camera, as if to tell the viewer that this is the type of “dialogue” that takes place with priests of Afro-Brazilian religions.

The threatening voice reminds the *pai de santo* that this area is “under the flag” of the Terceiro Comando Puro (a drug trafficking gang in Rio de Janeiro) and admonishes the priest for praying in a “dog house” (referring to the demolished temple). He tells the *pai de santo* that they (the traffickers) had already made it clear that Jesus comes first in their territory and they do not allow *macumba* (“sorcery”). The priest nods fearfully in agreement, as he continues to break the *ilekes*.

As the video draws to a close, the off-camera voice repeats the initial threats, “I’ve already warned you, if I see this again or I catch you trying to rebuild this shit, I will kill you.” The trafficker sees some ritual bottles outside the structure and tells the priest, “There are some Satanic bottles over there,” and orders the priest to destroy them. The priest steps out from the rubble, grabs a bottle, and shatters it against the crumbling wall. One of the attackers says, “I’ll finish destroying it now, I will tear down the wall,” and then they stop filming.

This video was one of two assaults on Afro-Brazilian priests in the city of Nova Iguaçu that Evangelical Christian drug traffickers¹ filmed between August and September of 2017 that were circulated in the news and on social media platforms. Afro-Brazilian priests report that these videos do not show the entirety of the horrors inflicted on the featured priests or others who were attacked but not filmed. The traffickers beat devotees and held them at gunpoint. They destroyed their sacred objects and forced them to swallow the beads of their *ilekes* (Religious Racism Research Initiative 2019). They urinated on their shrines (Coelho 2017). In at least one instance, neighbors watched the assault, then applauded and shook hands with the assailants.

These cases were part of a staggering number of attacks on Afro-Brazilian places of worship in Rio de Janeiro in a three-month period in 2017. During a single week in July 2017, seven Afro-Brazilian *terreiros* (places of worship) were destroyed in the northern part of the state known as the Baixada Fluminense (Antunes 2017). The State Secretariat for Human Rights reported that there were attacks on another seven *terreiros* in the city of Nova Iguaçu alone in August and September, where assailants engaged in “arson, vandalism, and destruction of sacred objects inside the terreiros” (Antunes 2017). Before the end of September 2017, arsonists and vandals had destroyed more than 30 *terreiros* across the state (Muggah 2017). Following this outbreak of violence, the state’s secretary of human rights, Átila Nunes, confidently opined that “drug lords identifying themselves as evangelical Christians” were the responsible parties (US Department of State 2017).

¹ The religious affiliation of the drug traffickers, Evangelical Christianity, is specifically highlighted herein to emphasize that the traffickers’ intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religions is motivated primarily or solely by their spiritual beliefs. As I discuss in greater detail in another article (Boaz 2020), since at least 2005, drug traffickers in Rio de Janeiro who have converted to Evangelical Christianity have been evicting and attacking Afro-Brazilian religious communities in the territories that they control. These traffickers regard Afro-Brazilian religious groups as their spiritual enemy and often refer to devotees as “sorcerers” or “devil worshippers.”

Such violent, armed attacks—aimed at not only destroying specific places of worship but also filmed and circulated with the intent of instilling fear into other devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions—seem to fit a classic definition of terrorism. However, nearly three years later and amidst wave of similar assaults that have reached epidemic proportions, the Brazilian government has yet to classify these Evangelical Christians as terrorists or to respond to them in a manner that such serious human rights violations clearly warrant. This article outlines the growing problem of Evangelical extremism in Brazil and explores how the global tendency to limit the use of the term “terrorism” to racial and religious “others” can help to explain Brazil’s inaction in the face of such an overt and widespread threat.

The Literature on Evangelical Extremism in Brazil

This article centers on a severely understudied aspect of religious intolerance in Brazil. The historical persecution of Africana religions in Brazil in the 19th and 20th centuries has received much more scholarly attention than have the 21st century challenges to religious freedom. Furthermore, most of the scholarship on the 21st century has focused on legal biases against Afro-Brazilian religions, exploring issues such as discrimination in schools and legal restrictions on animal sacrifice (Andrade and Teixeira 2017; Boaz 2019; Conte 2016; Marques 2014; Oro 2006). With the notable exception of Brazilian scholars like Rosiane Rodrigues de Almeida (2019), this study will be one of the few to examine physical violence against Afro-Brazilian religious communities in the present day. It is based on a public scholarship project that I began in 2019, analyzing and mapping cases of intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religions that have occurred in 21st century (ICCRR 2019).

Although 21st-century violence against Afro-Brazilian religious communities has not been well-studied, numerous publications on Evangelical Christianity in Latin America have observed certain branches’ growing animosity toward Africana religions. In particular, scholars have explored Neo-Pentecostals’ views of Afro-Brazilian religions extensively, explaining how they regard devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions as devil worshippers and believe it is their spiritual obligation to eradicate “the devil” from their communities (i.e., Da Silva 2016; Rocha and Vásquez 2013). Several have noted that this worldview leads Neo-Pentecostals to harass and attack Afro-Brazilian religious communities, and that they characterize these assaults as a form of “spiritual warfare” (i.e., Da Silva 2019; Oro 1997; Santos 2012). However, scholarship on Evangelical Christianity in Brazil has typically not centered on the violence enacted by these communities.

This article will differ from most previous work, which has centered around Neo-Pentecostals worldview, by focusing on the legal and social implications of attacks against Afro-Brazilian religious communities and on a critique of how outsiders label and interpret these assaults. Because this article decenters the worldview of the perpetrators, it does not deeply interrogate their mindset nor describe the process of the radicalization of some of these groups. Elsewhere, I outline more about the history of the most notorious perpetrators of violence—Evangelical drug traffickers—and their assaults on Afro-Brazilian religious communities (Boaz 2020). That article, however, is also more focused on the impact of the attacks and the categorization/recognition of them as serious human rights abuses than it is on the traffickers themselves.

In addition to decentering the aggressors, this article also avoids placing too much emphasis on Evangelical drug traffickers, as they are not the sole perpetrators of extremist or terrorist violence against Africana religions in Brazil. While trafficking gangs in Rio de Janeiro are perhaps the most organized assailants and have made the most blatant statements about their religious motivation, Evangelical attacks on Afro-Brazilian religious communities are occurring at an alarming rate in many parts of the nation. Extremists who have no apparent affiliation with Evangelical drug traffickers have assaulted, stoned, stabbed, and murdered devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions, and invaded and burned down their places of worship (Boaz 2021; ICCRR 2019). To focus solely on the trafficking gangs in Rio de Janeiro would discount the growing problem of widespread, routine violence that takes place in other regions and is carried out by individuals or less-established groups.

Although scholars and activists in Brazil have occasionally used the term “terrorism” to denounce this growing wave of Evangelical extremism, to my knowledge, only Rosiane Rodrigues de Almeida (2019) has discussed this term in detail. This article takes a more legalistic and international approach but builds upon some of De Almeida’s critics about Brazil’s limited application of the term “terrorism” and lackluster response to Evangelical extremism. It is likely the first time that an academic publication outside Brazil has interrogated these issues.

The scarcity of prior scholarship and the relative lack of public knowledge about this issue may be surprising given the severity, longevity, and frequency of the attacks described herein. However, the thesis of this article—the tendency to reserve the label of “terrorist” for those who are “exotic,” “foreign,” or “other”—could offer one explanation for how such a widespread and grave issue has largely escaped public scrutiny and official denunciation.

The Landscape of Religious Intolerance in Brazil

The attacks in the state of Rio de Janeiro noted above were not an isolated problem. Over the past several years, Brazil has been experiencing a general rise in acts of religious intolerance and a rampant problem with violence against Afro-Brazilian religions. There is ample anecdotal and statistical evidence that the perpetrators of this intolerance are predominantly Evangelical Christian extremists.

In 2011, the Ministry of Human Rights established a 24-hour hotline known as *Disque 100 Direitos Humanos* for victims and witnesses to report human rights violations. In the eight reporting years since then, *Disque 100* has received an astonishing 2,862 denunciations of religious intolerance (Ministry of Human Rights n.d.). More than 82% of these cases have occurred in the last four reporting years, between 2015 and 2018.

Devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions such as Umbanda and Candomblé are an extremely disproportionate number of the victims of religious intolerance. Since the start of the *Disque 100* program, devotees of Afro-Brazilians represent, on average, around 50% of the victims in cases in which the victim’s religion is known. In two of the last three years, 2016 and 2018, they were 64%—nearly two-thirds—of known victims. This is a staggering figure when one considers that these faiths combined comprise less than 1% of the population (US Department of State 2015, 1–2).

By contrast, Protestants are committing acts of religious intolerance at rates that far exceed their percentage of the population. Protestants represent around 22% of the population of Brazil; however, they comprised around 62% of the aggressors in religious intolerance cases reported to *Disque 100* in which the aggressor's religion was known. Additionally, on November 8, 2019, the International Commission to Combat Religious Racism ("ICCR") released a report analyzing 300 cases of intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religions that took place between 2000 and 2019. Of the cases in which the perpetrator of intolerance was an individual whose religion was known, 100% were Christians. Available documentation indicates that at least 80% of these known perpetrators were Evangelicals (ICCR 2019, 37).

Government reports such as *Disque 100* typically do not provide much specific information about the types of acts of intolerance that make up their reports. They could range from workplace discrimination, such as making an employee work on their Sabbath, to physical violence, such as property damage, assault, or murder. However, there are two sources that provide some sense of how prevalent violent assaults on Afro-Brazilian religious communities might be.

In 2010, the Palmares Foundation, an entity under the umbrella of the Ministry of Culture tasked with preserving Black influence on Brazilian society, began compiling information on intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religions. In 2015, the foundation reported that it had documented 218 violent attacks against devotees and places of worship (US Department of State 2015, 4). Similarly, of the 300 cases of intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religions in the ICCR's 2019 report, more than half were violent acts—37% constituted violence against property such as arson, destruction of shrines and stoning of places of worship; 10% constituted violence against persons such as stabbing, shooting, stoning and physical assault; and 9% constituted attacks on property that posed a danger to human life such as the use of incendiary devices or armed robbery. The following incidents provide examples of some of the violent attacks documented in these reports.

In July of 2014, arsonists burned down the home of a Candomblé adherent in the state of Rio de Janeiro. The homeowner "told authorities that her property has been targeted eight times in recent years, stating attackers have destroyed sacred images, shot at her home, and set her car ablaze" (US Department of State 2014, 4). The president of the State Commission against Racism, Homophobia, and Religious Intolerance informed the media that these attacks were likely carried out by "drug traffickers belonging to evangelical Christian churches" (US Department of State 2014, 4).

The following year, in June of 2015, two adult males followed the Campos family as they were walking home from a Candomblé service in northern Rio de Janeiro (Conte 2016, 55; US Department of State 2015, 4–5). The men carried Bibles and shouted at the family, calling them "devils," telling them that they were going "burn in hell," and that "Jesus will return." They also threw stones at the adherents, hitting 11-year-old Kailane in the head. The impact caused her to faint and suffer memory loss (Hider 2015; Travae 2015). Her family rushed her to the hospital. They reported the incident to the police, but it appears that the attackers were never identified.

Later that year, in September 2015, several Candomblé temples were targeted by arsonists. Two of these were set ablaze on September 12 in the state of Goiás, near the federal capital

(US Department of State 2015, 5). No one was arrested for either of these fires, so it is impossible to be certain about the perpetrator's motive. However, the leaders of both *terreiros* reported that they believed that their temples were targeted because of religious intolerance. The evidence seems to support that theory, as one of the religious leaders found an unscorched Bible sitting on top of the charred remnants of his temple.

Most recently, in 2019, there has been a renewed problem with Evangelical drug traffickers in the state of Rio de Janeiro committing violence against devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions and forcibly displacing entire religious communities. On or about May 27, 2019, the Commission to Combat Religious Intolerance, a non-governmental organization, reported that Evangelical drug traffickers had threatened and/or ordered the closure of at least one hundred Afro-Brazilian places of worship (Prado and Bassan 2019). A mere three months later, DECRADI (a specialized police force in Rio de Janeiro created to investigate crimes of racial or religious intolerance), doubled that number—reporting that at least two hundred *terreiros* were under threat from Evangelical traffickers in Rio de Janeiro (Jansen 2019). The situation continues to decline, not only in Rio but throughout the nation.

The Brazilian Government's Knowledge of Evangelical Extremism

While recent attacks have received an unprecedented amount of media attention, this is a long-standing problem of which Brazilian officials are well aware. Since the mid-2000s, the Brazilian media and government as well as international human rights bodies have observed the escalating problem of Evangelical extremism and their targeted attacks against practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions.

By 2006, and perhaps much earlier, major media outlets recounted graphic details of Evangelical drug traffickers restricting the rights of devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions. In February of that year, Mario Hugo Monken (2006) published an article titled "Trafficker is accused of vetoing Umbanda in Rio" in a well-known newspaper, *Folha de São Paulo*. Monken listed six communities in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro where traffickers, particularly the Comando Vermelho, had prohibited the practice of Afro-Brazilian religions over the preceding year. Monken also discussed how Fernando Gomes de Freitas, head of the Terceiro Comando Puro on Ilha do Governador (Governador Island), had promptly shut down Afro-Brazilian temples in the region's largest favela and banned the wearing of symbols associated with these faiths in his territory after he converted to Evangelical Christianity.

By the following year, concerns that Evangelical groups in South America were "demonizing" African-derived religions had gone beyond media reports to reach the official correspondence of international human rights experts. That year, the special rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance "noted with concern the rise of defamation against" African diaspora religions in South America, "in particular Candomblé in Brazil and Santeria in different countries of the continent, by powerful evangelical groups" (Diène 2007b, 15). The special rapporteur explained that these groups were conducting "campaigns of demonization" against African derived religions, "articulated around the alleged lack of rationality, inhumanity and barbarism of these religions" (Diène 2007a, 16).

While the earliest human rights reports focused on the mere demonization of African derived religions, over subsequent years, experts have repeatedly expressed concern that these biases have manifested in acts of intolerance. One particularly important source is the U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report because it frequently features information received from a nation's own officials about the issues in the country over the previous year. Starting in 2011, the US Department of State noted that there had been reports of intolerance toward devotees of African-based religions and that these formed the majority of the complaints received by the State of Rio de Janeiro's Office to Combat Religious Intolerance (US Department of State 2011, 3). The following year, the report repeated these claims, adding that now 97% of the complaints received by the Office to Combat Religious Intolerance were from Afro-Brazilian religions (US Department of State 2012, 4). By 2013, the International Religious Freedom Report featured specific details of the religious intolerance that continues to plague the country more than seven years later. For instance, it stated:

In September Rio de Janeiro media reported that drug traffickers were persecuting adherents of Candomble and other Afro-Brazilian religions in impoverished Rio communities. The media reported that drug traffickers had forced Candomble areas to close, expelled at least 40 Candomble leaders from the communities, and forbid residents to wear white clothing or display other outward signs of being a Candomble practitioner (US Department of State 2013, 3).

By 2014, multiple international human rights experts were documenting the worsening intolerance against devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions. The International Religious Freedom Report from that year indicated that "A Bahia official stated that the Secretariat for the Promotion of Racial Equality received dozens of reports of African Brazilian religious symbols and houses of worship being vandalized. In some cases, practitioners of African Brazilian religions like Candomble were threatened and assaulted" (US Department of State 2014, 3). That same year, the UN special rapporteur on minority issues reported that she was "seriously disturbed by increasing reports of harassment, intimidation, hate speech and even acts of violence against individual members of Afro-religions" and that she had "learned about vandalism of places of worship, including the burning of temples and the desecration of Afro-religious symbols" (Izsák 2016, par. 81). In fact, the UN special rapporteur noted that during the mere two weeks that she was visiting Brazil, arsonists had burned down two Candomblé temples in the Federal District (Izsák 2016, par. 81). Likewise, in 2014, the chair of the UN Working Group of Experts on Persons of Africa Descent expressed concern to the General Assembly about "the racism, persecution and violations of cultural rights and the right to religious freedom suffered by the religious communities of African origin, such as *Candomblé* and *Umbanda*" (United Nations General Assembly 2014, par. 17).

As these human rights reports increased, the Brazilian government began creating more of its own internal mechanisms that further documented this growing problem. For example, as discussed above, in 2011, the Ministry of Human Rights established the *Disque 100 Direitos Humanos* hotline. This hotline documented nearly three thousand cases of religious intolerance in Brazil between 2011 and 2018, and Afro-Brazilian religions averaged 50% of the victims in these cases. Similarly, in 2014, the Secretariat for Human Rights created the National

Committee on Respect for Religious Diversity. In 2016, the committee produced a 147 page “Report on Intolerance and Religious Violence” (Comitê Nacional de Respeito à Diversidade Religiosa 2016). In more than half of the 409 incidents discussed in the report, the victims were devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions.²

Brazil's Response to Evangelical Extremism

For most of the past 10–15 years, Brazil’s approach to addressing these now well-known acts of extremism has been confined to documentation and discussion without meaningful intervention. They created committees to receive reports of these atrocities, hosted forums for interfaith dialogue, and organized walks or celebrations in honor of religious freedom. Despite widespread knowledge that radicalized Evangelical Christians are the primary culprits of these acts, the government has never officially condemned these individuals as terrorists nor, until very recently, announced any plans to identify the origins of these extremist ideologies to attempt to cease their spread. They have never expressed concern at the Evangelical traffickers’ overt goals to eradicate Afro-Brazilian religions from the state of Rio de Janeiro and that the widespread forcible displacement of devotees might constitute genocide, nor taken meaningful steps to ensure the survival of these religious communities.

As discussed in the previous section, the Brazilian government has organized hotlines and established committees to report on religious intolerance. Coinciding with some of the earliest reports of the growing Evangelical denunciations of Afro-Brazilian religions, the state created a National Day to Combat Religious Intolerance in 2007 (Izsák 2016, 81). The government has developed a series of films, TV shows, and educational materials promoting religious diversity, and held workshops to promote interfaith dialogue (Izsák 2016, 81). In 2016, the federal government launched a social media campaign and a website to promote religious diversity and tolerance (US Department of State 2016, 4). Since 2016, the Palmares Foundation has been holding events in the Federal District, such as panel discussions on religious diversity, in honor of the National Day to Combat Religious Intolerance (US Department of State 2017, 5).

State governments have engaged in similar tactics. As discussed above, in 2016–2017, the State of Rio de Janeiro experienced an astonishing wave of attacks on Afro-Brazilian places of worship. In response, the state government created a special hotline, “Dial to Combat Discrimination,” to receive complaints of religious and racial discrimination (US Department of State 2017, 5). In October 2016, the municipal government of Rio organized a religious exposition, which included interfaith workshops and roundtable discussions as well as “religious musical and dance performances” (US Department of State 2017, 5). Similarly, in Nova Iguaçu, where much of the violence of the summer of 2017 took place, the government held a Forum on Religious Intolerance.

Amidst the creation of these committees, forums, and religious tolerance holidays, human rights experts repeatedly warned Brazil that its efforts were not commensurate with the severity of the attacks that had been taking place. In particular, the special rapporteur on

² The US Department of State International Religious Freedom Report for 2017 noted that 53% of the report was about devotees of Afro-Brazilian faiths.

minority issues expressed concern in 2016 that she had received reports of “widespread impunity” surrounding acts of religious intolerance such as assaults on devotees and places of worship. The special rapporteur averred that the “lack of responsiveness to complaints filed, or failure to investigate allegations, further contributes to a sense of marginalization and discrimination on the part of the communities. Moreover, the lack of accountability and trust in law-enforcement services has meant that followers of Afro-religions report feeling unsafe in their neighbourhoods and cities” (Izsák 2016, 18). The special rapporteur recommended better “police and judicial training” and urged, “Swift action must be taken against any incident of religious intolerance against Afro-religions, and the perpetrators of violence must be held directly accountable” (Izsák 2016, 20). However, Brazil was slow to adopt any of these recommended measures.

Furthermore, the new offices, commissions, and working groups that have been established have been plagued by a series of problems. For instance, in 2016, the city of Rio de Janeiro created a Municipal Office for the Respect of Religious Diversity. Immediately, religious leaders protested the appointment process, claiming that the government had simply given the job to their cronies who did not have the education or experience to fulfill the requirements of the position (US Department of State 2016, 5). Similarly, the national government created a working group in the Ministry of Justice to address religious bigotry. However, the special rapporteur on minority issues noted in 2016 that “to date, no meeting has been convened” (Izsák 2016, 18). Clearly sensing the lack of urgency with which the government was addressing religious intolerance, the special rapporteur reminded Brazil that “it is important that this body addresses the allegations of violence against members of Afro-religions and places of worship, and establishes tools to ensure that the perpetrators of such actions are held to account” (Izsák 2016, 18). Yet the following year, a non-governmental organization known as the Collective of Black Entities reported that government inaction persisted and that they were planning to file complaints with the United Nations and the Organization of American States to seek “accountability from the government for failing to investigate acts of religious intolerance and prosecute perpetrators” (US Department of State 2017, 6).

The government’s slow response to Evangelical extremism against Afro-Brazilian religions is further exemplified by comparing the process of the development of two state police forces to address crimes of intolerance. In the year 2000, a group of skinheads in Praça da República in São Paulo attacked a same sex wedding (Government of São Paulo 2009). Shortly thereafter, the Secretary of Justice and Defense created a group called Gradi (Group of the Repression and Analysis of Intolerance)³ to study and identify methods to combat intolerance, with a particular emphasis on homophobia. A few years later, in 2006, the state established the Delegation of Racial Crimes and Intolerance Offenses⁴ (DECRADI), a specialized police force to handle crimes motivated by intolerance. They also implemented mandatory training in human rights at police academies in the state. The rapid series of mechanisms developed to address homophobia and other types of intolerance following the

³ Grupo de Repressão e Análise da Intolerância.

⁴ Delegacia de Crimes Raciais e Delitos de Intolerância.

2000 attack demonstrates that the state took this threat seriously and was determined to combat it.

By contrast, the state of Rio de Janeiro's response to the threat against Afro-Brazilian religions has been painstakingly slow. One will recall that by early 2006, Brazilian news outlets had begun reporting that drug traffickers in Rio were targeting Afro-Brazilian communities—setting restrictions on some places of worship and evicting others. Around two years later, in 2008, state deputy Átila Nunes authored a bill to create a special police station that would address crimes based on prejudice or intolerance like the one that had been established in São Paulo. It took until 2011 for the Legislative Assembly of the State of Rio de Janeiro to pass this bill (Legislative Assembly of the State of Rio de Janeiro 2011).

The law itself seemed to take positive measures toward combating intolerance. It ordered a dedicated telephone line for the receipt of reports of cases of discrimination and tasked DECRADI with opening an inquiry into these cases. However, the final article of the law contained a very important limitation—it specified that the statute would not go into effect until the date of publication. It was not until more than seven years later, in August 2018, that the law was published in the state's Official Gazette and thus went into effect (Seara 2018). Even then, DECRADI was implemented without any additional funds designated to support its mission.

In 2019, when government officials announced that approximately 200 *terreiros* in Rio de Janeiro had been threatened by Evangelical drug traffickers, the inefficacy of state police forces became even more apparent. Julio José Araujo Junior, one of the members of the Federal Public Prosecutor's office who was leading the investigation into these Evangelical traffickers, referred to DECRADI as “a small police station with little capacity to deal with the issue” (Mello 2019). However, he also criticized the standard police forces for their lack of response to the growing threat. In May 2019, the Commission to Combat Religious Intolerance issued a highly publicized report indicated that traffickers had threatened 20 *terreiros* in the city of Duque de Caxias (*Globo* 2019). Three months later, in August 2019, Araujo Junior reported that the chief of the Duque de Caxias battalion did not even know about the attacks on *terreiros* there (Mello 2019). Clearly, despite the occasional arrest of the perpetrators of violence against Afro-Brazilian religions, there has been no properly funded and adequately staffed initiative to even begin to make a dent in this pervasive problem.⁵

Brazil's Limited Terrorism Legislation

Brazil's refusal to proscribe and prosecute Evangelical Christian extremism as a form of terrorism further illustrates the insufficiency of its response to this growing threat. Brazil recently passed an expansive law on terrorism. Although the statute was enacted amidst a wave of extremist assaults on Afro-Brazilian religions, Brazil failed to encompass this most pervasive form of terrorism in the new legislation. This omission is particularly striking because it comes

⁵ In August 2019, authorities arrested eight individuals suspected of being part of a ring of Evangelical drug traffickers known as *Bonde de Jesus*, formed solely for the purpose of eradicating Afro-Brazilian temples. However, this arrest, which appears to be the first of these Evangelical traffickers who have been apprehended for committing violence against Afro-Brazilian religions, came fourteen years after the start of the problem and did not apprehend all the perpetrators (*Jornal Estado de Minas* 2019).

as the result of Brazil deviating from global norms in proscribing terrorism. The recent acts of Evangelical extremism in Brazil, particularly those of the Evangelical drug traffickers, easily meet internationally accepted definitions of terrorism and would be encompassed by most other nations' terrorism statutes.

There is no universally accepted definition of the word "terrorism." Unlike the other human rights violations that have been categorized as *jus cogens* or peremptory norms (human rights violations considered so heinous that they are not permitted under any circumstance), there is no United Nations convention on terrorism. There are regional treaties about the suppression of terrorism; however, they fail to even attempt a definition. Scholars have devoted articles and entire books to teasing out the nuances of the word and exploring why it is so difficult to agree upon a definition (e.g., Gasser 2002; Richards 2015; Richards 2019; Whittaker 2004; Braber 2016).

Despite the inability to reach universal agreement on every aspect of the definition of "terrorism," there is a significant amount of overlap between international draft conventions on terrorism and the national definitions of terrorism in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and France (some of the nations with a recent history of serious terrorist attacks). First, all of these definitions agree that terrorism is an intentional or premediated action that targets a government, a particular group of people and/or or a general population (Penal Code, bk. 4, tit. 2, art. 421-1 (2016) (Fra.); R.S.C., ch. C-46, §83.01(1)(b)(i)(B) (1985) (Can.); Terrorism Act, 2000, part 1, §1(1)(b) (Eng.); United Nations 2005, art. 2(1)). While some definitions place a more specific emphasis on civilians than others, all imply that terrorists target non-combatants and operate outside of declared armed conflict (18 U.S.C. §2331(1)(B)(1); R.S.C., ch. C-46, §83.01(1) (1985) (Can.)). Acts that constitute terrorism are not always listed in the definitions; however, actions that endanger human life or cause serious property damage are widely accepted components (R.S.C., ch. C-46, §83.01(1)(b)(ii) (1985) (Can.); Terrorism Act, 2000, part 1, §1(2) (Eng.); United Nations 2005, art. 2(1)). Finally, all these definitions require a specific intent behind the act(s). Legislators agree that the intent to influence a government is encompassed by the definition; however, some definitions suggest that the mere intent to intimidate or terrorize a population is also sufficient (Penal Code, bk. 4, tit. 2, art. 421-1 (2016) (Fra.); 18 U.S.C §2331(1)(B); United Nations 2005, art. 2(1)), while others specify that terrorism must be meant to send a particular message that is political, racial, religious and/or ideological (R.S.C., ch. C-46, §83.01(1)(b)(i)(A) (1985) (Can.); Terrorism Act, 2000, part 1, §1(1)(c) (Eng.)).

The attacks carried out by Evangelical extremists in Brazil clearly meet all the generally accepted components of these definitions. Not only are these attacks typically intentional or pre-meditated, but they have also become systematic over the past few years. Violence often occurs in waves, with assailants carrying out the same type of intolerance (e.g., forced evictions or arson) in certain communities or cities in a short time span. The targets are always civilians, often including children and elderly persons. Common forms of attacks—such as armed invasions, stoning, bombing, and shooting—pose a significant threat to human life. The destruction of entire places of worship is also rampant, with cases of arson and property damage across the nation. Furthermore, Evangelical extremists are racially, religiously, and ideologically motivated. They mean to terrorize devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions and to

intimidate them into renouncing their faith, relocating, or closing places of worship. This satisfies all except the narrowest definitions, which confine terrorism to purely political crimes.

Although Brazil was already experiencing these widespread coercive acts of violence against Afro-Brazilian religions that meet global definitions of terrorism, the Brazilian government's March 2016 anti-terrorism law largely excluded the types of extremist activities that had been targeting Afro-Brazilian religious communities. The statute defines terrorism as certain acts carried out for purposes of "of xenophobia, discrimination or prejudice of race, color, ethnicity and religion, when committed with the purpose of provoking social or widespread terror, exposing the danger to persons, property, public peace or public safety" (Brazilian National Congress 2016). While this aspect of the definition is quite broad, the legislature significantly narrowed the scope of the statute when it identified specific acts that would constitute terrorism. The legislators did not proscribe common methods of violence against Afro-Brazilian religions, such as stoning or arson. Instead, they focused on the use of explosives, chemical weapons, or toxic gases. Similarly, while the statute includes an expansive list of the potential targets of terrorism (such as airports, railways, ports, hospitals, and sports stadiums), it does not prohibit attacks that take place in the common sites of systematic Evangelical violence—places of worship. The closest that the statute came to encompassing violence against Afro-Brazilian religions is a broad provision that includes endangering "the life or physical integrity of a person" as an act of terrorism. This could be applicable to the attacks that target devotees themselves and, perhaps, attacks on occupied homes or temples.

The omission of the most common types of violence suffered by devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions in the new terrorism law becomes more pronounced when one considers that the initial version of the law would have encompassed them. In addition to the above described acts of terrorism, the version that the legislature submitted to the president included setting fire, destroying, plundering, or burning "means of transport or any public or private property" (Brazilian Federal Senate 2015). However, then-President Dilma Rousseff vetoed this section of the definition, calling it "excessively broad and inaccurate" and expressing concern that offenses causing different levels of harm would suffer the same penalty (Agência Senado 2016).

Rousseff's stance is particularly perplexing considering that Brazil has no meaningful recent history of terroristic acts or threats aside from the Evangelical extremism that has been increasing since the start of the twenty-first century. The Counter Extremism Project, a non-profit and non-partisan organization that seeks to assemble a database on extremist groups, reports that "Brazil has experienced no major terrorist attacks in recent years." In fact, the CEP lists only two notable terrorist threats in recent Brazilian history, both of which occurred in 2015, the year before the new terrorism law was passed. The first of these was when the Brazilian government arrested several individuals who were sending funds and fraudulent documents to ISIS. Later that year, a known ISIS "foreign fighter and executioner" threatened that Brazil would be their "next target." These 2015 incidents may have played a role in the drafting of this new legislation. Concerns that terrorists would target the 2016 Olympic Games hosted by Brazil was also a significant impetus for this law (Counter Extremism Project n.d.).

One must consider the stark disparities between Brazil's approaches to the purported "foreign" threat of ISIS sympathizers versus the existing and escalating problem of domestic

extremism. While an incident involving financing terrorism and the mere threat of a future attack appear to have influenced the implementation of a new terrorism law, realized violence against Afro-Brazilian communities was not even considered in the drafting of the 2016 anti-terrorism legislation. Perhaps most notably, between May and November of 2015, arsonists had set ablaze at least thirteen Afro-Brazilian *terreiros* in the Federal District alone (De Deus Brito and Bchara 2015). Yet this wave of extremist attacks that took place in the months leading up to the introduction of the new terrorism bill and during the precise time period that this legislation was being revised and debated was not ultimately encompassed by this law.

“Exoticizing” Terrorists

Scholarly literature on the ambiguities and double standards of the application of the term “terrorism” in North America has highlighted a trend that I argue helps to explain Brazil’s refusal to denounce Evangelical Christian extremists as terrorists. Experts on terrorism have emphasized that the media, the public, and policymakers tend to deploy this term exclusively in reference to people and groups who represent the “foreign,” the “exotic,” and the unfamiliar. In doing so, they exempt domestic extremism carried out by mainstream racial and religious groups from being classified as terrorism.

In North America, scholars have primarily criticized the excessive use of the term “terrorist” for Muslims and the refusal to apply this label to white, Christian males. For example, Daniel Byman (2018) explains that, “After the 9/11 attacks, though, the United States focused on terrorism almost exclusively as a problem related to jihadis. Much less attention was paid to far-right violence, such as that committed by neo-Nazis, sovereign citizens, anti-immigrant groups, and others.” Similarly, Caroline Corbin (2017, 460–62) argues that “white Christian extremists who commit terrorist attacks” are not considered terrorists, rather, “the terrorist label is usually reserved for when violence is perpetrated by a Muslim.”

In the past few years, the responses of the media and government officials to some of the deadliest mass murders in North America provide ample examples of this hesitance to label racial and religious majorities as “terrorists.” For instance, on January 29, 2017, a white male named Alexandre Bissonnette opened fire on worshippers at the Quebec Islamic Cultural Centre in Canada, killing six people and wounding five others. As Caroline Corbin (2017, 462) has pointed out in her article “Terrorists are Always Muslim but Never White,” the media was quick to call Bissonnette a “lone wolf,” but not a terrorist. A Canadian congressman described the actions of “white terrorists who mowed down six Muslims praying at their mosque” as a “one off” that was different from acts inspired by ISIS or al Qaeda (Corbin 2017, 462).

Similarly, on October 1, 2017, a 64-year-old white male, Stephen Paddock, opened fire from the window of the Mandalay Bay Hotel in Las Vegas into a crowd of country music concert attendees below, killing 59 and injuring more than five hundred. Not long after the attack, the sheriff of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department reported in a press conference that they were considering the attacker to be a “lone wolf,” a “sole actor,” and a “local individual,” not a terrorist (Le Miere 2017). Khalid Beydoun (2018) contrasts the official characterizations of Paddock with that of 29-year-old Afghan-American Omar Mateen, who killed forty-nine people and injured fifty others in the Pulse Nightclub shooting in June 2016. Mateen, like Paddock, carried out the attack alone. Furthermore, the FBI had previously cleared Mateen of having any substantial connection to terrorism (Beydoun 2018, 1216–17).

However, Beydoun (2018, 1217) explains that because Mateen was both Arab and Muslim, he “fit within the embedded profile of the terrorist and he was ‘raced’ as such.” Beydoun (2018, 1217) avers that, “More often than not, race and religion are the most salient factors in determining whether law enforcement will conduct a terrorism investigation and prosecution.”

In December 2015, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) conducted a survey that provides further insight into why people like Paddock and Bissonnette evade the “terrorist” label in North America. The PRRI asked respondents (all of whom were living in the United States) two similar questions: “When people claim to be Christian and commit acts of violence in the name of Christianity, do you believe they really are Christian, or not?” and “When people claim to be Muslim and commit acts of violence in the name of Islam, do you believe they really are Muslim, or not?” (Cooper and Cox 2017). They found that 75% of surveyed persons responded that they did not view such persons as real Christians, while only 19% responded that they did regard them as real Christians. By contrast, 50% responded that they did not view such persons as real Muslims, while 37% responded that they did consider them real Muslims. By far, the white evangelical Protestants were most likely to impose this double standard, with 87% of respondents asserting that Christians who committed acts of violence in the name of Christianity were not really Christian while only 44% replied that Muslims who commit violence in the name of Islam were not really Muslims. The PRRI aptly named the report on these findings “Americans’ Double Standard on Religious Violence” (Cooper and Cox 2017).

Other studies have revealed an interrelated bias—the tendency to emphasize international or foreign terrorist threats while ignoring domestic extremists. In 2018, the Anti-Defamation League’s (2019, 26) Center on Extremism revealed that over the past ten years (2009–2018), right-wing extremists committed nearly three-fourths (73.3%) of domestic extremist-related killings in the United States. Islamic extremists—those stereotyped as the greatest terrorist threat—were responsible for less than one-fourth (23.4%) of these attacks. Other studies about terrorist attacks in the United States since 9/11 have reported similar statistics about the pervasiveness of right-wing violence (Corbin 2017, 483–84). Despite this striking data, the U.S. government has not developed meaningful mechanisms to combat the most prevalent forms of domestic extremism (Byman 2018; Anti-Defamation League 2019, 26).

Although often phrased in different ways, scholars seem to largely agree on the reasons for such disparities. Anthony Richards (2015, 40) succinctly explains “‘terrorism’ or ‘terrorist’ has often been used as a derogatory label against one’s enemies, or, put simply, terrorism has been viewed as ‘violence of which we do not approve’, or whose cause one disagrees with.” Richards (2019, 16) also adds a political dimension, explaining that terrorism is “violence that is illegal or seen as illegitimate by the prevailing power holders.” Daniel Byman (2018) agrees that, “In the general discourse, people tend to use the label ‘terrorism’ to demonize their opponents while avoiding it for groups that they see as sympathetic.” Caroline Corbin (2017, 463–66) adds that how one views “terrorism” is also the result of implicit bias—the persistent, negative stereotypes about certain groups of people.

It is clear how these theories have led to the focus on the purported threat of Muslims, especially those with foreign ties, despite the prevalence of other forms of domestic terrorism. Khaled Beydoun (2016, 111) explains that Muslims have been stereotyped as terrorists due to the “presumption that Islam is inherently violent, alien and inassimilable.” Islam is understood

as a foreign or “exotic” religion that is incompatible with North American societies. Daniel Byman (2018) adds that these biases also directly correlate to less emphasis on domestic terrorism because “at least some Americans sympathiz[e] with their cause even as they reject their violent means” whereas a “foreign-based attack brings America together in the face of tragedy.”

The above-named scholars have also lamented how implicit bias and the reservation of the category of “terrorist” for one’s enemies have created significant limitations in the protection of civilians. Caroline Corbin (2017, 485) expressed concern that ignoring right wing terrorism might encourage the growth of this kind of extremism. Daniel Byman (2018) agrees that if domestic extremist groups are not categorized as terrorists, they “are freer to raise money, recruit, and operate” and they can more easily post on social media without fear that it will be flagged or censored. Byman (2018) argues that applying “the ‘terrorism’ label [to domestic extremists] could start to push the government to act more quickly at the first hint of possible violence,” and to designate more resources to combating it.

Although focusing on the United States and emphasizing the dual factors of race and religion in the biased use of the word “terrorism,” these theories provide a potential framework for understanding how a well-documented pattern of violence against devotees of African-derived religions in Brazil can continue without the clear denunciation of the actors or a plan to curb the attacks. As discussed above, the perpetrators of violence against Afro-Brazilian religions are almost exclusively Evangelical Christians. Although Evangelicals are only officially 22% of the population in Brazil, they are the fastest growing religion in the country and have increasingly powerful representation at all levels of the government. Most notably, President Jair Bolsonaro is a staunch Evangelical, and the mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Marcelo Crivella, is a bishop of an Evangelical Church—the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus. Therefore, if the public perceptions of extremism in Brazil follow similar patterns to those in the United States, an increasing percentage of the population, including policymakers, would be reluctant to regard Evangelical Christian extremists as “terrorists” because they are neither a foreign nor an “exotic” threat. In fact, Evangelicals in Brazil would not view Christians who commit acts of violence in the name of their faith as “true Christians,” so they would consider them as isolated actors not connected to a larger movement or pattern of religiously-motivated violence. Somewhat paradoxically, while perhaps not openly agreeing with physical violence against Afro-Brazilian religions, government officials and a large percentage of the public might sympathize with the perpetrators because they agree with some of the ideology motivating these attacks.

Conclusion

Tragically, these assaults on Afro-Brazilian religions are only posed to escalate unless the government recognizes the methodical nature of these attacks. More than just buzzwords that garner international attention to a problem, concepts like terrorism recognize that acts of aggression are rooted in larger organizations, movements, and/or ideologies. They create a foundation for interrogating the motives of the attackers, the sources of agitation of the problem, and the radicalizing factors. They create a basis for state officials to denounce and suppress individuals and groups who promote violence, and to criminalize the spread of hate. In this case, such designations would require the Brazilian government to examine which

pastors and churches were encouraging their congregants to commit acts of violence against Afro-Brazilian religions, to determine the radicalizing factors that lead perpetrators to carry out violence in the name of their religion, and to ban materials that promote these forms of “spiritual warfare.”

Until the government takes the threat against Afro-Brazilian religions more seriously—until they recognize that the perpetrators are part of a widespread network of people who seek to both terrorize devotees and eradicate these faiths—their responses will always be reactive rather than proactive. Although they may secure the occasional arrest of a person who stoned an elderly woman or burned a temple, they will never be able to apprehend the Evangelical Christian extremist before they cast the stone or set the fire. This approach allows perpetrators to systematically assault hundreds—perhaps thousands—of devotees of African-derived faiths while the government watches, documents, and promotes “dialogue,” but, ultimately, does nothing of substance.

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