

A Call to a New Ecumenism

BY JUNE RAMAGE ROGERS

“When missionaries arrived in Asia, Africa and Latin America, trying to convert people, they condemned our ancestors, trashed our gods and goddesses and severed us from our indigenous cultures.”

**Kwok Pui-Lan in *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*
by Musa W. Dube Shomanah, St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice, 2000, p.32**


For more than 400 years, the religions of the Africans who landed on the shores of Brazil were prohibited. Today, the daughters and granddaughters of those Africans—whose blood is thoroughly mixed with the blood of the colonizers and the indigenous people whose land and cultures were destroyed—are reclaiming elements of their ancestors’ faith and drawing strength from some of the ancient rituals as their grandmothers did.

Rachel Harding points out in her book, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University, 2003), that this faith was the means of survival and resistance for African slaves who were often worked to death in four or five short years. Parents practiced infanticide because no one, male or female, wanted to bring children into such a life. Today’s black women of Brazil are empowered by a history (long withheld from them) abundant with heroines such as Zeferina, the woman warrior who fought the colonial government to the death. Zeferina now serves as a model to women of Bahia struggling with their identities.

Telling Faith Stories

In June 1992, the Women Black Pastoral Agents held a national conference in Salvador, Bahia, the entry point for millions of slaves who were brought to Brazil after enduring the unbelievable horrors of the Middle Passage (the forced voyage across the Atlantic Ocean). The conference theme was “Women, Religion and Politics” and the first day of this event included a procession of three groups of women: Protestants carrying their Bibles, the adherents of popular Catholicism holding high the black Madonna—Nossa Senhora da Aparacida—and believers of the traditional African religion, Candomblé. The leader of the Candomblé group, wearing traditional West African attire (in Brazil these women are called “baianas”), sprinkled a perfumed liquid on all those gathered. The three lines approached the front of the room, embraced each other and moved together, symbolizing the social and political issues facing black women in Brazil.

For the conference planning committee, of which I was a member, the liturgy was



The making of farina flour from manioc is a powerful symbol for the women of Brazil. It illustrates what can be accomplished when people of different faiths work together for the common good.

intentional in its pluralism. These doubly-, even triply- colonized women, whom I was privileged to accompany on their *caminhada* (faith journey), spent months telling their stories and analyzing their place—socially, economically and religiously—in Brazilian society. From the beginning, the planning group was ecumenical, including Catholics and Protestants from a variety of faith traditions. As they told their stories, they began to look critically at the factors that had impacted their lives and the lives of their grandparents. They became aware that many of their ancestors and even members of their own families, in spite of severe persecution by both the government and the Roman Catholic Church, still participated fully in the African religions active in Salvador and its environs.

The Christian Conference of Asia, the largest ecumenical group in Asia, rejects mission approaches that alienate people from their cultures and religions, and thus isolate the transforming power of the gospel from the context into which it is brought, and missions that ignore and deny the presence and activity of God among all people.

Many of the women had attended African religious rituals with family members, though often reluctantly because of the strong disapproval of the dominant culture, and knew the power and the strength that these services provided. Noticing that women are prominent as “mothers and daughters of the saint” in these services—in contrast to the all-male leadership of the Roman Catholic and most of the Protestant churches—women connected to the traditional African religion.

So the event planning committee decided, as black women oppressed because of their race, gender, social status and the religion of their ancestors, they need each other. Regardless of their religious background, they must join together to address the urgent political and social issues that impact women in their community.



Africans shipped to Brazil for slave labor (1538–1888) brought the Candomblé religion with them. Candomblé posits a monotheistic supreme being—usually referred to as Olodumaré—with orixás (gods or saints) called on as intermediaries between earthbound humans and the All-Powerful, much as a Christian might pray for a saint’s intercession on his or her behalf.

Reclaiming and Blending Faiths

Many leaders of the Protestant churches were repulsed by what they considered “evidences of the work of the devil” in the various forms of African religion. They forbade church members participation with or in these “cults” or in the most popular festival in Brazil, Carnival. Roman Catholics who had originally supported the slave trade and forcibly baptized arriving slaves, moved hand-in-hand with the colonial government to prohibit any African celebrations, religious or otherwise. In practice, however, they allowed some space for syncretic activities

among the masses, now a characteristic of popular Brazilian culture, especially in Bahia. Many of the Catholic saints have counterparts among the orixás. The most popular event of the year in popular Catholicism is the washing of the steps of the Bomfim Church every January by the “baianas,” clearly a syncretic celebration.

In spite of the ridicule and disapproval that would likely come from the Christian churches, the women moved in a bold act of solidarity to include Candomblé under their understanding and practice of ecumenism.

The women’s decision to recognize traditional African religions is not a phenomenon peculiar to northeast Brazil. Many postcolonial subjects throughout the developing world are daring to reclaim their heritage. This also occurs in the United States. George Tinker, an American Indian theologian, recently wrote the book,

Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), a bold declaration of the need for American Indians to reclaim their own spirituality. Black theologians, male and female, write of the remnants of African religion that enliven and enrich worship in black churches in the United States. Mercy Oduyoye’s Circle of Concerned Women Theologians in Africa issued its own bold call for a new ecumenism that includes women from the mission-founded Christian churches, as well as Islamic women and women from the African Independent Churches. Together and separately, they address urgent issues plaguing all of Africa.

Widening the Dialogue

How are we, as Presbyterian women, to respond to these challenges? I would suggest that before we criticize some of these emerging efforts and mission statements, perhaps we would do well to look at our own liturgies and worship. Haven’t our ancestors included symbols of ancient rituals and beliefs in our own religious settings? My father was born in Scotland and I love the bagpipes, one of the special accoutrements of Presbyterianism, but bagpipes were originally used as military accompaniment for troops during the Roman Empire. We enjoy Christmas trees in our churches, but the reverence for the evergreen is a Druid tradition. Most of us are aware that the date for Christmas was set according to the winter solstice. Our Sunday school children hunt for Easter eggs, and Santa is still part of many church festivities.

Did not Jesus heal the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman and

welcome the Gentiles? What remnants of their beliefs and cultural practices did they bring into the faith? The *Gospel of John* is resplendent with Greek images, language and philosophy, yet it is one of the most loved Gospels of the New Testament.

More important than all of this, however, is the necessity to share our hospitality and friendship with those of other religions, not only to honor and serve the welcoming gospel of Jesus, the Christ, but together to find solutions to the sociopolitical issues that concern our neighbors, male and female, near and far. That is what happened in Salvador when Protestant women, Roman Catholic women and the women of Candomblé joined hands and hearts to “plant the reign of God” in their beloved Bahia.

In the 1980s, theologian Martin Marty called on religious groups to study and learn more carefully the



syncretism—the combination of different forms of belief or practice

orixás—gods or saints; intermediaries between earthbound humans and the Supreme Being in the Candomblé tradition

doctrine and discipleship practices of their particular group, but also to come together as the Bahian women did to solve the ever-pressing problems of our nations and of the world. In his book, *When Faiths Collide* (Maiden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), he urges us to reach out and be present to one another. In this way “we choose to be a being-for-another,” as scholar and theologian Emmanuel Mounier suggests, reflecting Jesus’ command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

As Presbyterian women, I believe we are called to a new ecumenism

that reaches out to all in deep humility, listens carefully to the other and joins with them in the healing of this earth and the reconciliation of its people. We can thank the women of Bahia for helping to teach us that lesson. 🍷

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Who Needs Permission? Women Doing Ministry in Brazil

BY JANET RILEY

2005 and 2006 brought important ordination celebrations to the PC(USA)—the 100th anniversary of the ordination of women to the office of deacon, the 75th anniversary of the ordination of women to the office of elder and the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. From today’s vantage point, we may find it difficult to imagine a church where the gifts of women are not recognized and celebrated. Although we know that as women serving in these positions, we will encounter challenges, we take it for granted that as women we will be called to positions of authority. This is not the case in Brazil. Many creative and intelligent women have prepared themselves to serve as ministers of Word and Sacrament only to be told there is no place for them in the institutional church.

When has that ever stopped those who are gifted or called? As part of PW’s Global Exchange to Brazil, my encounters, however brief, with women serving there left me with a deep respect for the courage of Brazilian women who hold onto their visions for ministry despite obstacles in their paths. Let me introduce you to some of the women we met and share a little of their stories.

Our group toured Vitória’s Evangelical Hospital and met Reverend Maria Luiza Ruckert. As hospital chaplain, she attempts to minister to persons who travel long distances to receive medical help and often lack nearby support systems. The hospital has a commitment to minister to people in the region who are poor. Maria Luiza has assembled an incredible ministry team, including a very gifted guitarist and vocalist who



Reverend Maria Luiza Ruckert

shared her music with us. She embodies love through her radiant presence, touching the lives of all whom she meets.

Reverend Eliane Breda is senior pastor of the Ibes Presbyterian Church in Vila Velha outside of Vitória. Once a month, on a Saturday, her church hosts an incredible ecumenical ministry, caring for those in the area who suffer from skin cancer. Because of the limited public health system, many indigent farm workers had untreated skin problems. Dr. Carlos Coelho, a physician in Eliane’s

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Who Needs **Permission?** (Continued)

church, expressed his desire to start this ministry, which relies totally on the work of volunteer doctors and nurses as well as help from other churches in the area.

Currently, one million Brazilians claim membership in one of five Presbyterian denominations. Both Maria Luiza and Eliane are ordained in the United Presbyterian Church in Brazil (IPU), which has about 10,000 members and is a relatively young denomination that is especially committed to ministries of social transformation and ecumenical work. Right now, there are 11 women ordained in the IPU. One of the first women ordained in the IPU, and the first in Rio de Janeiro, was Neusa Maria Gomes da Silva. She shared with me that when she decided to first attend seminary in 1989, there was no financial assistance available to her. Because she did not feel indebted to the denomination and completed her studies on her own, she has felt a certain ability to call the shots in terms of her decisions on when and where to serve. Currently, she is involved in church planting in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro.

The Independent Presbyterian Church of Brazil (IPIB) ordained its first woman to the office of ministry of Word and Sacrament in 1999. Yet in the past six years, despite completing seminary training, few women have received formal calls, though many are performing ministry in a variety of settings. One such person is Solange Mello who is involved in a new church planting, Águas Lindas de Goiás, on the outskirts of Brasília. Brasília, the capital city of Brazil, was established in the 1960s. Many people from the northeastern interior migrated to Brasília in hopes of creating better lives for themselves. Now many immigrants find themselves in situations of dire poverty and cut off from their old communities. Solange has a passion for helping these people gain a sense of

hope. Her church, which has only been in its current location since April 2005, hosts literacy classes, prayer and Bible study meetings, and gatherings where women learn to do paintings and handicrafts that can help bring in money for their families. Solange and Estael, another young woman who has been trained as a church planter, live at the church site and devote themselves to improving the lives of the people there as they show the love of Jesus Christ. Although not ordained to this ministry, they are certainly called.

In São Paulo we met Adriana de Sousa. Young, articulate, and energetic, Adriana completed her seminary training in affiliation with the IPIB, but was concerned with the denomination's reluctance to ordain women as anything but deacons. She has intentionally chosen not to seek a church, but to pursue her studies in gender issues at the Methodist Theological University in São Paulo, so that she will be able to address some of the core issues surrounding the discrimination women face in ministry.

Maria Sandra dos Santos is an Afro-Brazilian professor of church history at ITEBA, the Institute for Theological Education of Bahia, located in the city of Salvador. Sandra gave our group an introduction to the history of the region, sharing the history of the colonization of Brazil, particularly the northeast region. Although slavery was outlawed in 1888 in Brazil, the underdeveloped area of Bahia still operates on a slave economy with Afro-Brazilians treated as an underclass. Sandra spoke of her people and their struggle: "Listen, remember and speak about the resistance. Keep alive the memory of our African ancestors who were massacred." Sandra is part of the movement of reconstructing the history of this region so that it authentically reflects the experience of her people. She is way beyond asking anyone's permission.



Reverend Eliane Breda, of the United Presbyterian Church of Brazil (IPU)



Solange Mello, left, with one of the women of Águas Lindas



Maria Sandra dos Santos, professor of church history, ITEBA