

BOOK REVIEW

The Charismatic Gymnasium: Breath, Media, and Religious Revivalism in Contemporary Brazil

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The Charismatic Gymnasium by Maria José de Abreu is a fascinating and erudite study of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) that sheds light on contemporary religious and political transformations in Brazil. The work offers an astute ethnographic examination of the political theologies, ritual and media aesthetics, and pneumatic bodywork within the religious movement. A central merit of the book is the way de Abreu analyzes the internal dynamics of the CCR to convincingly show how the movement converges with, and resembles, the workings of right-wing populism in Brazil. *The Charismatic Gymnasium* enables us to understand the mechanisms through which these theopolitical movements find popular resonance. De Abreu deftly shows how Catholic Charismatics transfigure modernist, colonial-era styles of Christianity into a contemporary “aerobics for Jesus.” As de Abreu narrates how maverick priests at the center of the CCR movement produce a ritual sphere that holds in tension the institutional contradictions inherent to “Catholic Pentecostalism,” readers learn how the movement puts a new twist upon older styles of muscular Christianity. Drawing parallels between the CCR and right-wing populism in Brazil, de Abreu adds profound insight to the growing bodies of literature on religion and dominionist styles of Christian mass mediation. *The Charismatic Gymnasium* is therefore vital for thinking comparatively about contemporary populist configurations of religiosity in an array of world locales, North and South.

To understand the conjunctions between the CCR and right-wing populism, de Abreu illustrates how both movements pivot upon contradictory sets of principles. The postcolonial Catholic Church struggles to manage the contradictions of the CCR—a configuration that combines Roman Catholicism with Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity. Historically, the Catholic Church accommodated and authorized the movement under

Vatican II; nevertheless, CCR has had an uneasy relationship with Catholic authority. On one side, the Church must balance its self-conception as a steady, “earth-bound” establishment associated with the “rock” that is Saint Peter. On the other side, the institution must contend with the allure of “pneumatic” (breath-based) Pentecostalism—a movement tightly associated with Saint Paul and with the very forms and styles of religious expansion that the Catholic establishment fears may supplant it. More than detailing these theologies as blueprints for the development of these two religions as adversaries, she illuminates how they uniquely combine, with their apostolic genealogies held in tension within the CCR. De Abreu illuminates how Brazilian CCR priests partake in steroidal and occasionally bellicose theatrics that denigrate Catholic establishments—cutting into them in ways that infuse *pneuma* into the Catholic form. By showing how the CCR hacks into the institutional establishment with adversarial energy, this perceptive study captures how these mavericks create breathing room for a middling effect that balances the “complexity of opposites” (Schmitt [1923] 1996), entailed by the coming together of the Catholic and the Pentecostal-Charismatic forms. Elsewhere, de Abreu (2018) has productively coined the *portmanteau* “pneumatoliberalism,” to explain CCR’s theopolitics of breath within this era of dynamic and oscillating political economic subjectivities.

Through the ethnography, readers learn how Brazilian Charismatic Catholic priests entreat devotees to participate in a workout, inspiring them to partake in prayer that rhythmically coordinates the breath. The work lays bare how ecclesiastical figures of CCR curate charismatic spaces, innovate, and produce mass media empires—in stadiums, sanctuaries, and televangelical spaces—collectively comprising what de Abreu evocatively calls a “charismatic gymnasium.” The charismatic gymnasium

resembles a corporeal infrastructure—soft and pliable, yet muscular, like lungs.

The logic and dynamism of CCR make the gymnasium a living, breathing entity, wherein contradictions of mismatched elements are aerated, metabolized, and held generatively in tension. The CCR is marked by aesthetic excesses that de Abreu characterizes as “baroque”—involving the “juxtaposition of contrasting elements [that] convey a sense of drama, movement, and tension.”¹ Tracing the genealogy of baroque Catholic aesthetics in 17th- and 18th-century Brazil, de Abreu details how the seemingly anachronistic aesthetic is relevant for thinking through the dynamism and rhythms of the CCR of Brazil. She analyzes various confounding elements—Byzantine icons, monobloc chairs, and a Catholic convent’s pietistic quietude that is ensconced within an exuberant Charismatic Catholic “sanctuary” and media empire. Yet, de Abreu does much more than examine their pertinent symbolism. Through ethnographic empiricism and historicization, she creatively theorizes how the gymnasium holds in tension the contradictions that are ever being generated within the religious movement, and in the populist politics that emerged in the era of neoliberalism in this postcolonial lifeworld.

Given the admixture of genealogies that buttress and inspire the movement, de Abreu (157) writes,

... the Holy Spirit then appears as a complex network that operates at once with and against the church, pulled and pushed from all sides to expose, above all, its capacity to stretch in opposite directions.... What unites all the parts in the conflict is the sharing of the common refrain according to which the Holy Spirit is on the side of the “members,” a term that ... connotes lay people as a corpus.

The rhythm, movement, and dynamism are incorporative processes that generate the networked body of CCR believers. De Abreu demonstrates how these processes parallel and intersect with the formation of populist politics in Brazil. Populist movements prototypically enmesh contradictory elements. De Abreu finds a comingling of Catholic Liberation Theology and the Pentecostalist gospel of prosperity. At the same time, flexible and authoritarian politics operate alongside one another in Brazil. Contradictory inclinations coalesce in the sinister “pragmatic totalitarianism” exemplified by Jair Bolsonaro (5).

Ernesto Laclau (2005) has analyzed how heterogeneous elements within populist movements at first blush appear too illogical and incoherent to consolidate ideology. But rather than producing conceptually closed ideological circuits, Laclau (12; emphasis in original) argues that “metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, catachresis—become instruments of an expanded social rationality, and we are no longer able to dismiss an ideological interpellation as *merely* rhetorical.” While de Abreu does not invoke nor rely upon Laclau’s theorization, her ethnography combines investigation of theopolitical rhetoric with perceptive study of visual icons and pneumatically dynamic gestures to presciently detail a social rationality that oscillates—it expands *and* it contracts, like a set of lungs. Much as energetic flows and heightened intensities circulate and pulsate through nodes in a

network, she illustrates how kinesthetic flows within the gymnasium work to consolidate populist sensibilities. She indicates that the mechanisms of this consolidation rely only very lightly upon what religious leaders rhetorically put into words.

Whereas for Laclau the “floating signifiers” of populism gain traction and *grounding*, de Abreu is emphatic that grounded metaphors don’t suit these movements in Brazil. Rather than “taking root,” she shows how these phenomena are in the air, rising and falling like the breath, or suspended and swinging like a pendulum between conceptual poles. She details how, in facing the contradictions of populism, and Catholic Pentecostalism, theopolitical sensibilities “get a workout” via the undulating aesthetics and affects within CCR’s devotional spaces and mass mediations. Yet too, as de Abreu aptly considers, just as the pendulum of populist moods swings to the far right, it also can equally swing to the left, as can be seen in the end of the dispensation of Bolsonaro, with the election of Lula in 2022.

While the body of CCR believers is disciplined within the “gymnasium,” de Abreu finds it imperative to take non-dialectical and non-discursive approaches as her mode of inquiry. The ethnography is distinct from other important studies of religion, media, and politics, which center Foucauldian approaches to interpellation and subjectivation to understand enculturation and religious embodiment. De Abreu enlarges the view to analyze nondiscursive dimensions of these movements precisely because the sheer “complexity of opposites,” the aesthetic excesses, and the Holy Spirit pneumatics that induce glossolalia (a nondiscursive speech form) and give fluidity to the CCR movement, demand it.

Considering how *The Charismatic Gymnasium* creatively and adroitly contends with the theopolitics of breath, religious media, and populist politics, its publication during the Covidian age makes the contribution to ethnographic theory especially timely. The work offers novel analysis of the allure of a messianic theopolitics. De Abreu’s ethnography is relevant not only to understanding contemporary Brazil, but is also profoundly helpful for developing comparative knowledge of conjunctions between polarized yet pliable forms of religion and media, and the dynamic reconfigurations of body politics—the understanding of which is so pressing in our times.

Endnotes

¹Merriam-Webster.

References

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