

Moving theology: perspectives of practical theology as hermeneutics of lived religion in Brazil

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This study reflects on the possibilities of thinking about practical theology—especially liturgy and homiletics—as a hermeneutics of lived religion on the basis of Brazilian pop culture and cinema as spaces where culture, body, politics and religion shape the paradigm of movement and the search for alternatives, opening up hermeneutical possibilities for practical theology to rethink a church and a society being perpetually reformed. These possibilities are reflected on by considering the concrete case of the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB) as a migrant and moving church and by looking at the hermeneutics of lived religion in cinema as a form of a continuing movement and a moving theology.

Introduction

The Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB) originated from a migratory movement in the first half of the 19th century. German immigrants and refugees migrated to southern Brazil in search of new prospects and alternatives for survival. This migration movement has marked the life and theology of this church: the quest to integrate and become inculturated within the context of religion; the articulation of liberation theologies as spaces for social and political transformation; inter-religious dialogue; and the development of a practical theology as ex-centric and postcolonial reflection are some of the marks of this migrant and moving church and theology. Continuing the movement, this study reflects on the possibilities of thinking about practical theology—especially the liturgy and homiletics—as a hermeneutics of lived religion on the basis of Brazilian pop culture, starting from two films, *Central Station* (Walter Salles 1998) and *The Motorcycle Diaries* (Walter Salles 2004), as spaces where culture, body, politics and religion shape the paradigm of movement and the search for alternatives, opening up hermeneutical possibilities for

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A moving church

Movement is a fundamental category for understanding human life and human beings, the cosmos. Everything that lives moves, and movement gives shape and content to everything that exists. It is not by chance that religions were organized around and based on movement. Religions move (Buntfuss 2009). *It is no different with the small Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB), which originated in a migratory movement that occurred during the first*





half of the 19th century when European immigrants and refugees, mostly German, emigrated to Brazil, especially to the south of the country, seeking new prospects and alternatives for survival, as clearly portrayed in Edgar Reitz's 2013 film Die andere Heimat. Through this movement, people came into contact not only with another geography, but also with another culture, other people, other forms of religion, the harsh reality of facts. In these clashes, they reinvented themselves as persons, congregations, synods, churches, moving as part of a reality. As the families grew, one century later members of the church migrated within Brazil itself, to regions further north, or to Paraguay in search of better living conditions. Later, they moved from the countryside into the cities, following the abrupt rural exodus of Brazil in the last decades of the 20th century.

This migratory movement, whether through physical movement or movement in its symbolic dimension, has marked the life and theology of the IE-CLB church. When crises occur, some kind of movement can be seen in this church. This took place in the sixties and seventies, when the church, driven by the theological reflection first developed at its main educational institution, sought to integrate and inculturate itself into the Brazilian context. It moved to become a Brazilian church, a church relevant to the local context (Schünemann 1992, 55). Amid a socio-political crisis, influential sectors of the church articulated themselves ecumenically through the theologies of liberation as spaces for socio-political transformation in a movement that was not only an approach to reality, but also of awareness building regarding the possibility of reinventing the church itself and its theology. Practical theology has been a major space for ex-centric and autochthonous reflection. In other words, such crises and movement, which are marks of this church, create the possibility of making not only a theology, but a theology incarnated within this particular context and culture (Schünemann 1992, 56).

Based on this category of movement, I have chosen to focus on a further step taken by this movement. One of the great contributions of liberation theology was that it opened up a space for thinking about a contextual and localized theology. As Westhelle says, “the problem here is the insertion of the God who acts in history in the delimited contexts of our regionality. It is the attempt to think about religion within the sphere of the region, understanding the universal gestated in its particularity” (1990, 258). For this reflection, theology itself had to come out of its own shell and articulate itself

based on other fields of study, such as sociology and politics. It had to engage in dialogue with other churches and, later, with other religions and religiosities, such as the indigenous and African-Brazilian ones, with mysticism, syncretism and religious hybridism, which are all marks of Brazilian culture and society (Bobsin 2008). The step also requires the movement to think about theology beyond the explicit and institutionalized field of religion, and to advocate a theology based on everyday life, culture, pop culture and the media, i. e. to think about practical theology not only starting from the practice of the church, but from the practice of people in their individual, everyday (Reblin 2008), mediatized lives, to make a hermeneutics of this lived religion. For this exercise, I have partly used what in the European context has been called a hermeneutics of lived religion (Ganzevoort 2009).

Practical theology as a hermeneutics of lived religion

I learned about the concept of lived religion primarily through the studies done by Failing and Heimbrock (1998), Gräß (1995, 2000, 2002, 2006) and Ganzevoort (2009, 322), and more specifically through Gutmann's texts (1998, 2013) on its relationship with pop culture. This concept became important to me when I was sent by the church to serve as a school pastor at an evangelical school in the south of Brazil. There, I dealt on a daily basis with children and youths who were not linked to the church, who had little involvement or interest in the church and in religious issues, who resisted the classical traditions of theology and who were indifferent to biblical and theological issues. Based on the forms of pop culture that the adolescents knew and valued, such as songs, films, advertising, games, characters and Internet content, it was not only possible to hold a dialogue with them, but also to reflect together on issues that made sense. Besides, I myself was discovering a new theological richness in the materials of pop and media culture, which fascinated me precisely because it brought theology closer to the context shaping the young people's lives.

In Brazil, we do not experience the phenomenon of secularization as markedly as in the European countries, a fact clearly verified by, for instance, Peter Berger (2001) and Pollack (2015). The vertiginous growth of Pentecostalism is but one example (Bobsin 1999). At the same time, however, the num-



ber of people professing no religion has grown considerably, according to census surveys. On the other hand, regardless of the power of religious groups and trends, the practices and experiences of pop culture, such as soccer, cinema, TV, the Internet and music are widely disseminated throughout Brazil. It should be asked, to what extent do people seek in these environments—which in Brazil are full of elements with religious origins and institutions—something that is also religious? To what extent do young people, people who not find space for their spirituality in Pentecostalism or in the evangelical and charismatic movements, find in pop culture or in everyday spirituality an expression of spirituality? But the main question addressed in this chapter is as follows: To what extent can lived religion provide us with a theological movement that enables us to think about a practical theology based on Brazilian pop culture and its religious expressions?

The concept of lived religion is complex and controversial. Dietrich Rössler, discussing the term in 1976, claims: “Die gelebte Religion bleibt unbestimmt, vage, unüberschaubar und schwer einzugrenzen” (Rössler 1976, 67). My purpose here is not to explore its definition, much less to enter into this controversy (Herrmann, 2007). In this essay, I am satisfied with its use as a functional concept: lived religion is a way of looking at and perceiving religion and theology not based primarily on their theoretical, sociological or dogmatic concepts or on the tradition of the Church, but rather on the basis of that which culture and people do and say is religion and religious, as understood by Ganzevoort and Roeland: “The concepts of praxis and lived religion focus on *what people do* rather than on ‘official’ religion, its sacred sources, its institutes, and its doctrines. As such, practical theology has much in common with what in disciplines like anthropology, sociology, and media studies is known as ‘the practical turn’: the turn away from institutes and (cultural) texts to the everyday social and cultural practices of ordinary people” (Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014, 93). This applies both to the Latin American theologies that dared to practice theology based on what people experience and express as being theology and religion and to expressions of pop culture, such as the movies. This discussion on normative theology and experiential theology requires further study (van de Matitjjs 2011).

It should be mentioned that lived religion does not involve only implicit forms of religion and the religious, but also explicit forms, which is ascer-

tained by evaluating people’s everyday theology, the way they interpret their spirituality and church experience. In both cases, therefore, religious traditions and origins are important because they provide the foundation for understanding lived religion and putting it in dialogue with theology itself. Obviously, when I take up a concept like this one, even if only functionally, I am considering the concept of religion as something broad and open. In this sense, from a sociological perspective Thomas Luckmann’s concept of “invisible religion” and, from a theological perspective, the method of correlation in Paul Tillich’s theology of culture are important.

Film as the movement of a lived religion

Films are essentially about movement. According to Morin, movement is the only thing that is real in film:

Photography was immobilized in an eternal instant. Movement brought the dimension of time: the film develops, it lasts. At the same time things in movement realize the space they cross and pass through, and above all are realized in space. ... The conjunction of the reality of movement and the appearance of forms provokes the sensation of concrete life and a perception of objective reality. The shapes provide movement with its objective structure and movement gives body to the shapes. (Morin 1980, 108)

Films are dense and complex cultural and artistic constructions and, as such, they must be judiciously analyzed and interpreted (Monaco 2009; Aumont and Marie 2004). In this essay, I will take two films as the space in which lived religion moves, based on what, according to the director, their narrative and their characters express as being aspects of religion and theology. Both films present a narrative that takes place in movement, as “road films”, the reason for which they were chosen. I believe that films are mirrors of culture and, consequently, mirrors of people’s lived religion. According to Kunstmann, “popular culture offers the ideal mirror for that which is consistent for the individual and gives life meaning. Without it, it is impossible to understand life today” (2009, 11). I will therefore take only the narrative dimension of the film as a basis for analysis (Ganzevoort 2014, 214–223). Unfortunately, it is not possible to give a thorough description of the narrative and characters here for reasons of space.



Central Station

Central Station (Central do Brasil, Walter Salles, Brazil/France, 1998) is a French-Brazilian drama about a woman named Dora (Fernanda Montenegro) who works at the central train station, Central do Brasil, in Rio de Janeiro, writing letters for illiterate people for money. Every day, after taking the crowded train, she sets up her small booth next to the chapel at the station, writing letters for illiterate people: love letters, letters to distant family members, letters to begin a relationship, angry letters, and so forth, all according to her customers' needs. At home, with her friend, she decides which letters will be mailed, which will be torn up and thrown away, and which will wait in the drawer (like in "purgatory", they say) for a later decision. Dora is a retired schoolteacher who works with the letters to supplement her pension. She is a sensitive person, despite her harshness with the customers and the subterfuges she uses to solve situations (the so-called Brazilian "jeitinho"). Dora does not let herself be affected by the difficult situation of the station and of her customers.

One of her customers, Ana, comes with her son Josué (Vinícius de Oliveira) and asks Dora to write a letter to her husband, Jesus, who lives in Bom Jesus do Norte, in the Brazilian backlands. This is a common situation in Brazil: people from the northeast who migrated to the large city centers in the southeast (Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo) remain apart from their relatives for years. Ana writes scolding her distant husband, who is an alcoholic—"the worst thing that happened to me", she says—to tell him that Josué would like to visit him. When Ana came to Rio, she was pregnant with Josué and had left her husband and two other children in the backlands. As she leaves the station, Ana is run over by a bus and dies. Josué, only 9 years old, who has nowhere to go and no one to protect him, is forced to live at the station. Dora feels sorry for him, and against her principle of keeping emotional distance from the dramatic situations at the station, she decides to help him, first by taking him home with her and then by taking him to his father. Several times in succession, she attempts to get rid of the boy and send him on his way, as though he were one of her letters. She even tries to sell him for adoption. She is not successful. She has to go with him herself, take him "home", deliver him personally.

Aspects of a lived religion in Central Station: clues to a moving theology

According to Santos (2002), the "central" theme of the film is seeking the other and fleeing from the other. With the pretext of seeking the father, Dora and Josué go to the backlands in search of themselves and of each other. As to the theme of religion, although the film contains a large number of religious images and moments, especially of popular Catholicism, the theology of the film does not lie in its religious elements, but beyond them. According to Santos, the dramatic high point of the film is when Dora and Josué are at the very heart of the Bom Jesus procession. Dora is looking for the boy, who had run away. Desperate, abandoned and tired, Dora faints and is then sheltered in the boy's lap (which Santos identifies as an inverted Pieta, the image of the film poster), which portrays the profound care for the other and for oneself. This is the main theological element, the "central" aspect: the miracle does not lie in the procession, not in traditional, formal religion, but in the profound and committed finding of oneself in the other, in the encounter with individuality outside oneself. That is where redemption lies. The transcendental aspect is the human condition as something other, something ultimate, beyond the expected.

A moving theology, one starting from the IECLB and designed for it, may be instigated by at least two aspects of the movie: (a) its genre and narrative; and (b) an analysis of the film's central theme. As far as genre and narrative are concerned, the movie challenges theology and the IECLB to move beyond their respective boundaries. For a church that still has strong ethnic features and a theology that is still quite dependent on Europe, such as the IECLB, this means accepting the challenge of going to the "backlands", facing adversity and risks. Making theology in Brazil means taking risks along the way, encountering other religions and religiosities, dialoguing with the hybrid and syncretic ways in which the people make theology, with all the tricks of daily lived culture, but, first and foremost—like Dora and Josué—it means discovering that an authentic theology renounces theological truths and rules for the sake of life, for the sake of individual, relational and social dilemmas. A moving theology has to do with the concrete struggle for survival and dignity, however minimal. It is right there, in the encounter with the other, in the exchange of gazes, in the relation-



ship—in Buber’s terms—that an authentic and actual transcendence (Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014) takes place. The church and its theology of movement do not need to take a metaphorical bus in search of the father and of themselves in Brazil’s northeast. It is sufficient to look at the border areas, the peripheries, the religious elements next door, the alternative cultures surrounding our churches in the country’s different regions. There we can find a pulsating, challenging, disturbing, ex-centric religion on the basis of which we can and must reinvent ourselves theologically.

The second aspect of a moving theology based on this movie broadens the first one. It is related to the movie’s central theme, namely the caring for and finding of oneself and of the other as the central theme of lived religion in *Central Station*. In this respect, it should not be forgotten that encountering the other involves estrangement and flight from oneself, flight from the other as the means through which the encounter becomes authentic. A moving theology that starts from this center redirects our gaze beyond tradition, beyond proper theology, beyond the correct administration of the sacrament, beyond the IECLB’s cultural and theological isolation. It involves taking oneself and the other seriously, understanding that the encounter with oneself and the other, even when so different and perhaps repulsive, is what promotes Christ and should move theology. Liberation theology, which has had such a strong impact on the IECLB, already announced and denounced the difficulty of making a theology starting from the other, from the poor. Usually this finding led to, besides a change in theological discourse, the setting up of social and diaconal programs with vulnerable groups. The encounter with the other, however, did not always take place. The traditional congregation moved its assistance to the periphery and the periphery remained where it was. The encounter of Dora and Josué, the sheltering in the lap, is much more than that. They teach us the meaning of essential care and transformation, where we authentically encounter God.

Motorcycle Diaries

The film *Motorcycle Diaries*, also by Walter Salles (Diários de motocicleta, Walter Salles, Brazil/Argentina/Chile/Peru/USA/UK/France/Germany, 2004), tells the story of a young Argentine, Ernesto Guevara (Gael García Bernal), and his journey of

discovery through Latin America together with his friend Alberto Granado (Rodrigo de La Serna). The script for *Motorcycle Diaries* is based mainly on a book of the same name by Guevara, with additional elements supplied by *Traveling with Che Guevara: The Making of a Revolutionary*, written by Alberto Granado.

At the age of 23, Ernesto, who has asthma, set off on a motorbike, the “Poderosa” (Powerful One), together with his friend Alberto in search of amorous adventures and surpassing limits, giving free rein to their adventuresome and hedonistic desires through an extreme experience, something common among the young, especially wealthy youth. We are in Buenos Aires, in 1952. The two young men are university students, bored with life and an already established future as members of the Argentine economic elite. Ernesto is finishing medical school; Granado has already finished biochemistry. The expedition should cover eight thousand kilometers in four months, along the Andes Cordillera, in the south of Argentina, Chile, Peru, Colombia and Venezuela.

The film begins as an adventure comedy, but gradually it becomes a drama, not primarily because of all the difficulties that the trip imposes on the two young men, but also due to their contact with the social ills of the continent, especially their face-to-face contact with the indigenous people and the misery they are subjected to by the large, powerful landowners, the exploitation of human labor in the Chilean mines and the isolation of people living in a leper colony, where those who are most ill remain confined on an island on the other side of the river. A world of injustice, segregation, misery and inequality, completely unknown to the two travelers, is revealed to them during the trip, so that Guevara finds himself profoundly changed by his observations on life. At the same time, he realizes the need for a radical response to the profound social and human inequalities imposed on the excluded. It is as though the situation of the people whom they meet along the way was not in harmony with the adventure.

Aspects of a lived religion in *Motorcycle Diaries*: clues to a moving theology

The film barely contains explicit religious elements. The few explicit elements of traditional religion (e. g. the lepers must participate in the mass as a condition for receiving lunch) appear more as a critique



than as a contribution to the plot. Lived religion is found in the human aspects of the film, such as the change in the gaze, in the realization of human misery, in finding a reality that should not be: “How would Latin America be if there had been no Conquest?” Ernesto asks himself at Machu Picchu. It is a theme of becoming aware of oneself and one’s role in the world. At many moments, through altruism and in proximity to the other, Ernesto reminds one of Jesus, as in the proximity to the lepers, treating and cleaning a patient’s feet, his identification and solidarity with the miners, his radicalness and daring to think differently.

The central theme of the film, in my opinion, is this change in the gaze. At some moments, Che talks about the gaze: the empty gaze of the sick old indigenous woman, waiting for death, “involving us in the great mystery that surrounds us”, as he says; the dark, tragic gaze of the mining couple who have been stripped of their land and possessions, of themselves. Furthermore, the film often concentrates its focus on the gaze of Ernesto himself, as when he looks astonished at Machu Picchu and asks himself how could he feel nostalgic for a world he did not know; or his angry gaze at the small boat crowded with poor people, together with the animals, being towed by the comfortable boat on which he is standing; or the moment when Ernesto, on the evening of his birthday, looks at the distant island where the contagious lepers are kept, who for that reason are separated from the others, as he himself had concluded a few days earlier. Ernesto dives into the river and swims across to be with the lepers. In my opinion, this crossing is the high point of the film. It is not by chance that the theme song of the film is *Al otro lado del río* (To the other side of the river), by Jorge Drexler (Drexler 2011). Here too, I think, is the religious heart of the film: the crossing of the river, the moment of awareness, facing the risk of death, as a true baptism, to be reborn as a new person, one with a purpose.

Crossing the river summarizes and symbolizes the crossing of the entire trip and the itinerary of his transformation of himself, the crossing of himself: *Sucedió algo en la ruta que tengo que pensar por mucho tiempo. Yo ya no soy yo* (Something happened on the road that I must think about for a long time. I am no longer myself). This is Ernesto’s conclusion at the end of the film. By losing everything, the safe life of the future physician, his girlfriend, the “powerful” motorbike, his money, his belongings, in essence losing himself, Ernesto finds himself as a new

person, something to think about in light of Luke 9:23 and 24: “If any person would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save their life will lose it; and whoever loses their life for my sake will save it.” There is a meaning beyond that which is visible and apparent. This meaning is gained by a new way of gazing.

Whereas the former movie opened up a horizon to the concrete reality of life and relationships in Brazil, this film takes us beyond, to Latin America, to the discovery of the ground we are actually walking on. The image revealed to the viewer’s gaze is at the same time fascinating and frightening (Rudolf Otto’s “numinous”). In other words, Latin America itself is a *locus theologicus*, a theological reality in itself. This is an important aspect to be considered.

A second aspect has to do with conversion. In the case of the IECLB, the film’s narrative with all of its metaphorical and symbolic nuances, such as the crossing of the river via Ernesto and Drexler’s theme song, challenges us to a process of changing our gaze, of conversion. Usually conversion—whether of a social or more personal nature—in the IECLB is encapsulated within imported and traditional models. Ernesto, with his friend and his motorcycle, his gaze and his path, teaches us another type of conversion, a conversion brought on by the adversity of the journey, a conversion brought on by human shock, a conversion of the gaze that becomes aware of human misery. Here we have an important key aspect of lived religion, one that can move the church and its theology.

Besides these two aspects, another question that profoundly provokes me in this film—and that surfaces in a subtler manner in the former one—is the absence of explicit religious elements. The religious element in the film, lived religion, is human. It has to do with a profound encounter, with becoming aware of the injustice and lack of dignity to which many people are subjected, it has a concrete relationship with lepers. A moving theology incites us to find again the place where the religious element pulsates. In the film, this element is diluted in life, in misery, in neediness, in abandonment. In other words, lived religion here is actually a lived, experienced, pragmatic, real religion. It is in the change caused by the exchange of gazes. To move theology on the basis of this narrative means to become aware of this change. The theology constructed on the basis of this exchange of gazes will be a different one, at the very least a moving theology.



Practical theology as a moving theology: a conclusion

Whereas the classical reflections of theology and the traditional work of the Church are based on paradigms such as interpretation and textuality, the way religion is presented on the basis of what culture perceives is more connected to life in its rawness and fragmentariness, physical and emotional experience of very simple everyday situations, packaged in a beautiful poetic, artistic, aesthetic construction. According to Jörg Herrmann (2007, 326), there are at least three points of view that must be taken into account when one analyzes the contents and forms of the media context, such as films, based on theology: the meaning of the aesthetic, of the bodily-emotional and of the mimetic.

The two films are movements according to all meanings of the concept of movement. The two films bring us out of reality, presenting us with and exposing us to crisis and adversity, to the void represented by the northeastern backlands and by the social desert of Latin America, so that there we can experience how people discover themselves in the other's lap and gaze. In order to find themselves, they must lose themselves. Both are ultimately transformed. Thus, mimetically the films transform their characters, but also those who watch them. The two films are a dive into the reality of misery and suffering, but also into the common and simple everyday life of our dramas and dilemmas, and precisely therein lies the great mystery of existence, the meaning of the personal life of human beings. It is a meaning that has not been established beforehand, but that shows itself to each one insofar as they allow themselves to move toward the other and, in so doing, beyond themselves, to be able to discover themselves as beings. In the case of the two films, the answers lie not in the formulations, rituals and traditions of formal religion, but beyond them.

It seems to me that herein lies the great contribution of this kind of perception of lived religion: it puts us in touch with that which pulsates in the life of a human being and which in the theological and ecclesiastic tradition often no longer seems to communicate and make sense. Salles, consciously or—more likely—not, places theological and religious elements within the drama of life in the Brazilian and Latin American context. This appears to me to be the great contribution to contextual practical

theology, something very different from an academic, rational, formal, closed theology. We thus have a moving theology, without answers, without simple solutions, without a closed moral. It may be said that in neither film do the characters find what they are seeking (the father and adventure), leaving the solution open to the audience.

The film, a mirror of culture as a space of lived religion, becomes a mirror of theology itself, of practical theology. Would this not be precisely one of the primary roles of the liturgy and homiletics as a representative action (Schleiermacher's "darstellendes Handeln"): to be the mirror of a person and a congregation in the encounter with the mystery of existence within simple and complex life, in everyday movement? Certainly, we have in this type of hermeneutics of lived religion a rich space to reflect on practical theology in Latin America and contribute to the movement of the contextualization of churches, like mine, thus creating a movement to approach the theology and lived religion present in pop culture.

Concretely, this moving theology takes place in reflection, in articles such as this one, but it should not be limited to this space. The movies might be watched and discussed in the context of a congregation, in youth groups, among groups of adults, in worship services (such as the *Film-Gottesdienst* in Germany). The narratives might be used in a sermon as a way of establishing a dialogue between the biblical text and the context. But a moving theology should not stop there. The two films encourage me to think about actions and rites that enable movement, such as pilgrimages and processions, and the IECLB might create concrete movements—such as representative and actual actions—within its context, movements that enable a genuine exchange of gazes, an authentic encounter with oneself and the other, estrangement and mirroring, movement in the sense of the two movies. Thus, by reflecting on, by analyzing, the films in the congregation and by moving concretely, we could articulate a beautiful moving theology that might lead us to sing: *Sucedió algo en la ruta que tengo que pensar por mucho tiempo. Yo ya no soy yo! [Something happened on the road that I must think about for a long time. I am no longer myself!]*.



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