

The
Heart
That
Bleeds

L A T I N A M E R I C A N O W

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"Where is it written that we have to be coherent?"

I KNOW A MAN here who believes that he killed three people. He did not take part in any actual killings, and, in fact, none of these deaths were violent, but he thinks that at the time they occurred he was acting as an intermediary for the Devil, and that in return for his help the Devil got rid of his enemies. Seu Ramos, as he prefers to be called, is a small, round, pink-skinned man with wispy white hair and a benevolent squint that turns sinister when he recounts his experience with telepathic murder. "Thanks be to God!" he likes to exclaim in referring to his deliverance from his heinous past. He has made some radical changes: he no longer drinks, he no longer smokes, he no longer conjures the death of his enemies. Seu Ramos's intense concern with matters of the soul might appear surprising to those who think of Rio de Janeiro as a place where only the body and its pleasures are worshipped, but a fervent and restless spiritual life is something he has in common with most cariocas, or inhabitants of this city. These days, he is a deacon in a well-established Pentecostal church, at peace with the world, and hungry only for more converts to Jesus Christ. He is, in other words, a perfect product of the latest stage of Rio's religious effervescence: a militant cross-over from the traditional Afro-Brazilian religions that have

helped define the carioca spirit to the sprouting dozens of fundamentalist evangelical sects that are now at its religious vanguard.

What Seu Ramos left behind was Umbanda, a blend of traditional Afro-Brazilian religions with the still fashionable French theory of spiritism. From its black roots Umbanda derives a belief in gods brought from Africa by the slaves, and the practice of provoking a trance state through ritual dances that allow the gods to "descend" on their worshippers. From spiritism, which was first propounded in Lyons by the mystic Allan Kardec in the mid-nineteenth century, Umbanda borrowed the theory of reincarnation and the pursuit of physical healing and spiritual guidance through communication with the souls of the dead. Like Haitian *voodoo* and Cuban Santería, Umbanda holds that the spirits are able to influence, and even terminate, human life, but in its magpie delight in incorporating new spiritual theories and ritual practices Umbanda is distinctly carioca—flexible, tolerant, and insatiably curious about new experiences. Umbanda has no central authority and no official statistics, but one can guess that its followers here number in the millions. It is virtually the official religion of the city's poor, who are predominantly black but include large numbers of immigrant Portuguese and their descendants—like Seu Ramos—and migrant whites and mestizos from the impoverished countryside to the north. The most respectable middle-class neighborhoods are also dotted with Umbanda temples, however. Politicians and anthropologists consult Umbanda seers, and on New Year's Day the major dailies run big news stories on the seers' forecasts for the next twelve months. On New Year's Eve, vast numbers of cariocas participate in one of Umbanda's central rituals: dressed in white, they gather on the city's beaches at midnight to light candles and offer prayers to the ocean goddess Yemanjá. Nonbelievers join believers in the ceremony, for the same reason that agnostics elsewhere celebrate Christmas—because it is a lovely and meaningful part of their history and tradition.

The secretary of public works for the city, Luiz Paulo Corrêa da Rocha, says that he does not mind at all that his political adversaries call him a Marxist-Spiritist. The question came up while

we were discussing his recent suggestion that a special area be set up in one of the forest preserves surrounding Rio where followers of the Afro-Brazilian religions could deposit their *despachos*, or propitiatory food offerings to the gods. Corrêa had pointed out that among numerous other advantages—tranquility for the worshippers, contact with the natural forces where the divine spirit resides—such a park would lighten the work load of the already beleaguered street-cleaners, who have to sweep up tons of additional detritus each weekend, after the offerings are set out on street corners and in parks. I was fascinated by his technical and convincing explanation of how food offerings that are made by human beings in this three-dimensional universe can actually get absorbed into a parallel vibratory particular magnetic field—a given god's wavelength—so I asked him what he himself believed in.

"I believe in reincarnation and communication with the spirits," he said. "But I also believe in the founding principles of Marxism-Leninism." He shrugged, smiled mischievously, and added, "Where is it written that we have to be coherent?"

Eclecticism comes naturally to people here. There are large numbers of Catholics who are also socialists—Brazilian bishops practically invented the combination, back in the nineteen-sixties—and Spiritists and Umbandistas don't see why, if Catholics can simultaneously hold high office, preach the need for revolution, and pray to a man who rose from the grave three days after his death, anyone should think it strange that they can talk with the spirits of the dead and concern themselves with social change. By and large, cariocas do not think it strange: in its infancy, in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, Umbanda suffered the same persecution that Rio authorities inflicted on all black social activities, but more recently relations between the Umbandistas and the municipality have flourished. Partly this is because many officials are sympathetic to Umbanda or, like Corrêa, are directly involved in it or in some other form of esotericism. Partly it is because Umbanda and its colorful rituals are seen to contribute positively to the city's image at a time when Rio otherwise seems under siege.

Nearly seven years of electoral democracy, following twenty-one years of military rule, haven't managed to improve most people's standard of living—not that of the miserably poor, and not that of the better-off. A series of ambitious economic megaplans has led only to successive waves of hyperinflation. The latest plan, put in place by President Fernando Collor when he came to power, a year and a half ago, has only aggravated the steepest industrial recession the country has ever known. Thirty years of decay, Corrêa admits, are beginning to take their toll of Rio's patience, although the city's beauty is so extreme and so poignant that one could believe it capable of surviving all the indignities visited on it. The spectacular outcrops of solid granite that punctuate the landscape more than make up for the dreadful modern high-rise buildings in their shadow. Near-permanent traffic jams are more tolerable when they take place along the still waters of the Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon or the shimmering bay of Guanabara. The breathtaking perspectives from the heights of the city's five hundred or so favelas—hillside slums—can lift the spirits even of the perpetually unemployed.

There may be limits to this tolerance, however. The city is still recovering from the experience of having gone bankrupt under its previous administration. At the time, the governor suspended work on a new section of the Metro which was being built to connect the downtown business area to the glitzy neighborhoods of Ipanema and Copacabana. The gaping holes remain, and now the surrounding buildings are threatening to slide into them—a situation that makes for a certain ill humor in their neighborhood. An underwater sewage main burst the other day, adding its contents to the already polluted beaches. Even lying on the sand has become less pleasurable: bands of favela teenagers maraud the oceanfront despite the efforts of special police detachments that regularly frisk black youths before allowing them onto the beach.

Corrêa pointed out to me that today Rio's finances are sound for the first time in decades, and yet the city's problems are so deep that money can't solve them. "The principal service the citizenry wants is an educational program for children that includes

meals," he said. The reasons are clear: some two million of Rio's six and a half million inhabitants live in favelas and improvised squatter camps. Many more live in barely decorous poverty in more established neighborhoods. The number of single-parent households here is known only to be staggeringly high. What parents want, Corrêa explained, is some kind of school that will guarantee their kids more food than they can afford to buy, and will keep kids for a full day so the mothers can work to provide some food themselves. Leonel Brizola, the governor of the state of Rio, instituted such a plan and built sixty schools in the city alone during his previous term, but Corrêa says that building more isn't necessarily a budget problem only. "Where are the people who are qualified to administer the schools, run the cafeterias, fix the plumbing, design the programs, teach the kids?" he asked. "We'd give any percentage of our budget to have them, but there simply aren't enough qualified people to go around."

In outlining the city's problems, Corrêa was drawing a map of its misery, for, as he pointed out, the fact that Rio is back on a sound financial footing doesn't mean that people are less poor. On the contrary, more people who are unable to make the rent are taking up residence in the favelas, he told me. More families are simply living on the street, and more hospitals are increasing their purchases of an intravenous glucose solution to cope with the increasing number of cases of infant dehydration. When he asks the people what they would like most after schools with food programs, they say that they want public lighting, because the rise in drug warfare, kidnappings, assaults, and death squads has made all residential streets unsafe. Assaults and kidnappings can also take place on Avenida Copacabana at noon, but people seem to feel that if there is some public lighting in their neighborhoods after dusk they will at least see what they are dealing with. Clearly, survival under these circumstances calls for imaginative solutions, and religion as it is practiced by the cariocas is nothing if not a triumph of imaginative thought. The gods and spirits of Umbanda that Seu Ramos once worshipped, and that he now calls devils, are proof of this.

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THE GODS ARE ON DISPLAY at the Spiritist Tent of Granny Maria Antonia of the Congo, one of the more successful of many thousands of Umbanda temples in Rio. The temple is not a tent at all but a spacious, comfortable two-story house with a long open-air corridor and a shining tile-walled meeting hall on the ground floor; it is called a "tent," or tepee, in honor of the spirits of various Indians—among them the Indian of the Seven Crossroads, the Indian of the Coral Cobra, and the Indian Who Tears Up Tree Stumps—who are believed to have lived long ago in the Brazilian jungle. The Granny who is honored in the temple's name is a well-known Old Black Woman, the spirit of a slave who was born in Africa and died in Brazil. At this temple, Granny Maria Antonia is the principal spirit incorporated by Stella Virginia dos Santos Soares, who runs it. She is a tall, imposing black woman of such extraordinary efficiency in every gesture that one cannot help having faith in her, and hundreds of people do. She has dozens of regular initiates, mostly white and quite well off, and she is also extremely popular among the black slumdweller on a hill behind the middle-class neighborhood where her temple stands.

When worshippers arrive for ceremonies that take place every Friday night, they stop in the corridor to pray briefly before half a dozen shrines, where the gods live. During the years of slavery in Brazil, which lasted until 1888, blacks managed to worship their own African gods—*orixás*, in Yoruba—only by disguising them as Catholic saints. Candomblé, a religion that sprang up in the northern city of Salvador da Bahia, standardized a canon of camouflaged gods, and Umbanda followers in Rio borrowed it. St. George, for example, is actually Ogum, the god of wars and metals, who, like his dragon-slaying Christian counterpart, carries a sword. According to legend, St. Barbara's pagan father, who sought to have her executed for becoming a Christian, was felled by lightning, and so *Iansã*, the warrior goddess of the forests and of lightning, is worshipped under her name. *Yemanjá*, the gentle mother goddess of the oceans, who dresses in blue and white, is the Virgin Mary—in her incarnation as the Virgin of the Im-

maculate Conception, who wears the same colors. Most of the plaster-cast figurines in the shrines at Granny Maria Antonia's were made specifically for Umbanda worship, and they would look a little strange inside a Catholic church: the colors are too bright, St. George looks too angry, and the Virgin Mary looks strangely buxom and hippy. On a separate altar, the statues of an Indian and an Old Black Man are more recognizable: the Indian is holding an arrow and wears a long headdress of feathers, like Sitting Bull's, and the Old Black Man is portrayed sitting pensively on a tree stump, smoking a corn cob pipe.

Although the Indians and Old Black Folks are not *orixás* but mere spirits, their cult is what defines Umbanda. Indeed, the religion is said to have started one evening in 1908, after the participants in a middle-class Spiritist séance refused to allow an Indian spirit to speak. The séance regulars, who were white, were used to communing with the likes of Voltaire and Plato, and when the Indian of the Seven Crossroads tried to butt in he was told that Indians were "forces of darkness," and was asked to go away. The Indian got angry and, speaking through a sickly adolescent, whose vocal cords he had borrowed before, he swore that he would found a religion in which Indians and Old Black Folks would finally have a voice. In Umbanda's religious hierarchy, they are ranked as inferior to the *orixás*, but have a central advantage over them: in Candomblé, when the *orixás* take possession of their initiates they make their presence known by executing characteristic dance movements, but they remain silent. When the Umbanda spirits appear, they talk. Indians, on their allotted night, suggest potions and incantations for the medical problems of their devotees. Old Black Folks, who appear on separate evenings, impart wisdom and spiritual counsel.

On a night when an Indian session was to take place, I found Stella Virginia dos Santos Soares selling soft drinks and chicken empanadas to her followers at a refreshment stand she runs at the entrance to the temple. After the snack, the faithful headed for dressing rooms in the back to change from their work clothes into all-white costumes that looked like hospital uniforms. The resemblance is no coincidence. Stella is a former nurse who loved

her work, and she tries to bring as much of its character as possible into her ritual center. "Standard white uniforms are more egalitarian," she told me. "There are very rich and very poor people here, but once they've changed there's no way of knowing the difference." Briskly, she instructed an assistant to show me and a photographer friend to our assigned places for the ceremony, which, with the aid of a clock on one of the shiny, hospital-like walls, was to begin at eight sharp.

Stella summoned everyone into the meeting hall and directed the rest of the seating arrangements. Those who were wearing street clothes—non-initiate suppliants—sat in pews at the back. In the middle, ranged in rows according to rank, stood the white-clad initiates, and they were flanked by white-clad apprentices, who sat on tile-covered benches against the walls, with a gleaming metal spittoon on the floor between every two people. Stella stood at the front, facing the congregation. Behind her, chairs for special guests were on one side, and on the other stood a drummer and half a dozen singers. In the center of the front wall was the altar, topped by an image of Jesus Christ, who appeared to be blessing ranks of Umbanda saints below. With startling speed, the ceremony got under way: the drummer beat out a complicated rhythm, the singers chanted an invocation to each of the saints and then to an Indian named Seu Tupinambá. At that point, Stella's body jerked up, down, and sidewise, and she sank into a crouch. She remained in that position for a few seconds, sighed, and then straightened up and lit a big cigar.

Soon all the initiates had incorporated Indians and lit up. Indian spirits like to smoke and spit, and Stella doesn't like messes—that's why she provides the spittoons. They were in use throughout the ceremony, which proceeded at a breakneck pace and developed a sweaty, dreamy intensity. While the chanting continued, Seu Tupinambá—whom Stella had now incorporated—gave orders. The suppliants at the back were told to come forward seven at a time, barefoot and without their jewelry, and when they were lined up in front of the altar Seu Tupinambá strode past them, waving his arms energetically above their heads. At the end of each pass, he disposed of the evil energies

he had absorbed by shaking his hands in the direction of the apprentices on the benches; they received this discharge and howled, metabolizing it into harmless force. When all the suppliants had received this initial cleansing, they were told to line up again, in rows facing the altar, this time one per cigar-smoking initiate. Each initiate blew smoke around the aura of a suppliant and, with loving care, performed healing gestures with his arms. At last, the initiates and the apprentices, their medical mission accomplished, were allowed to attend to themselves. They danced, sang, and went into little spinning frenzies. The apprentices fell into long, suffering trances that shook their bodies and sometimes made them weep, and the initiates took care of them, watching to see that they did not bump into anything or otherwise hurt themselves. Every once in a while, for no apparent reason, Seu Tupinambá or another of the temple elders went up to someone and offered a warm, healing embrace. Then, at a signal from Seu Tupinambá, everyone lined up again, sang farewell to the spirit guests, and shuddered briefly as the otherworldly visitors departed. By ten-thirty, it was all over. The former Indians clustered once again around the refreshment stand to sip beer, laugh, and chatter loudly.

"Why do I do this?" a woman named Gloria said later. "I've asked myself that question a hundred times, and I can't come up with a logical answer." Gloria is part of Stella's high command, a middle-aged woman with bleached hair and a friendly, intense manner. She lives in one of many airy, terraced high rises that dot the temple neighborhood, a bastion of the middle middle class that has gradually settled here since 1900, far away from the frivolity of the oceanfront neighborhoods to the south. There are bakeries, and family restaurants serving heavy Portuguese food, and all-girl schools housed in birthday-cake fin-de-siècle manors. Everything bespeaks respectability, and so did Gloria's attire and that of her husband, who had also turned into an Indian at the earlier session and now sat silent while Gloria speculated about the origins of her faith.

Typically, the couple had first come to Stella's, some fifteen years ago, because Gloria's husband had a health problem that

doctors couldn't cure. The sessions helped almost immediately, even though for the first year or so the couple did nothing but sit quietly in the back pews. Then a day came when the spirits arrived and took possession of their bodies, and there was no turning back. "Now, I ask you, how could a couple like us, well-educated, well-off, professionally successful, fall into this?" Gloria said. "You know, there are some sessions when I turn into a child, and when I think of the things this child makes me do I think I must have a screw loose! I jump around, turn somersaults, talk nonsense. But the thing is, even on evenings when we think how much nicer it would be to rent a videocassette and stay home, we know that there are people waiting who need our help. For us to stay away, it would be like a surgeon leaving the hospital waiting. So we don't stay away."

Just about everyone I've talked to who has ever been involved in Umbanda, including Seu Ramos, the lapsed sorcerer, has testified that the religion cured him of some physical ailment that doctors had failed to treat successfully. Stella and other temple heads, though, attach even more importance to Umbanda's ability to deal with psychological disorders. Basically, Stella says, her sessions are "one big therapy," and it's not difficult to understand how they might help. During a session, someone who harbors a sorrow so deep that he may not even know he has it can wail and curse—and remember nothing once he has come out of his trance. Timorous women can turn into powerful Indians. Favela blacks can be transformed into gods, and middle-class whites can feel earthy and uninhibited by turning into black and Indian spirits. (And there is an Amazonian variant of Umbanda in which beleaguered real-life Indians can incorporate a singular family of spirits called *gente fina*, or, roughly, "people of a better class"—whites, presumably. The *gente fina* drink only champagne and soft drinks and act terribly refined.) It is part of Umbanda's genius that it knows how to make room for each person's strongest fantasies.

Stella would disagree with this analysis. She thinks that her religion's healing properties are much more scientific, and go beyond mere catharsis. She believes that emotional distress is

caused largely by "obsessor spirits"—spirits who, unlike the Indians or the Old Black Folks, have not yet reached the enlightened state that allows them to help humanity. "For example, when my mother died, I knew I was going to be in bad shape until her soul found a way to depart into the other world," she told me one afternoon before the start of a session. "When she appeared in our sessions, we worked with her, helping her to overcome her grief and adjust to her new state." As her mother grew to accept her own death, Stella's depression lifted. There is some evidence that severe mental disorders can also be helped through the kind of ritual that Umbanda has perfected. The head of the Umbanda Federation of Rio de Janeiro, one of several associations that have been formed periodically to try to bring the thousands of dispersed temple heads together, told me that he had been committed to an insane asylum as an adolescent. Now, in his early fifties, he is a successful lawyer, and he believes that he was cured because a psychiatrist at the asylum put him under the care of an Umbanda center.

Umbandistas who talk to outsiders such as reporters are careful to stress these aspects of their religion, because another aspect of it is one that comes up for discussion much more often. That is Umbanda's commerce with spirits that evangelicals like Seu Ramos zero in on—a commerce that allows him to say he was once employed by the Devil. The basis for Seu Ramos's assertion is Umbanda's commitment to a spirit known as Exu.

Strictly speaking, Exu is not one but many, and he isn't really the Devil, either, but Umbanda has blurred the difference between Satan and the spirit it represents as a cloven-hoofed, leering creature with horns. This disturbing figure is responsible for the only real schism in Umbanda's eighty-year history—between those who reject his worship and those who accept it. Umbandistas who follow the founding fathers' principles by rejecting the Exus are very much a minority, dismissed as practitioners of "white Umbanda" or "Umbanda Lite" by those who keep an altar for Exu at the entrance to their temples. Traditionally, the Exus that "black magic" Umbanda borrowed from Candomblé are divine messengers who allow human beings to communicate with

the *orixás*, and who must be propitiated with offerings outside a temple before the ceremony can start within. Even in Candomblé, though, Exus have certain riveting characteristics: they are priapic; they are utterly ruthless; they preside over cemeteries, where flesh is transformed into spirit. In Umbanda, the ceremonies staged in their honor are the hands-down crowd favorite.

At Granny Maria Antonia's one afternoon, Stella proudly showed me a video she had had made of the once-monthly evening sessions she holds in honor of the Exus. The Exu who takes hold of her is called Seu Midnight, and he did not seem at all distressed by the presence of the camera. Wearing a top hat and a black cape with gold tridents embroidered on the back, he stalked about, limping, and hissed commands to the lesser Exus who had taken possession of Stella's disciples. These minions appeared in the form of *malandros*—ne'er-do-wells, rogues, and pimps—and of their female counterparts, the *pombagiras*, who are gypsies and streetwalkers. Just as the Indians resemble cigar-store figures much more than real-life Amazon Indians, who neither live in tents nor smoke cigars, the streetwalkers and pimps who appear at Stella's belong to a Rio underworld that is long gone. These days, prostitutes are into spandex, and the *malandros*, who wear Bermudas and heavy gold chains, are drug traffickers, not mere pimps. But the initiates at Granny Maria Antonia's had dressed for their visitors in the old style, which included white patent-leather shoes and fedoras or straw boaters for the men and flouncy embroidered dresses for the women.

In a sense, the video was disappointing. Although everyone in it appeared to be having a typical carioca good time, swigging ritual beer, dancing, and flirting outrageously, there didn't seem to be anything particularly lewd or sinful about the ceremony. (For one thing, the *pombagiras*, in their layered petticoats and low-cut bodices, were wearing far more clothes than most women here ever put on.) For all the ceremony's friendly cheer, however, the fact remains that Exu is in charge of manipulating evil. It was to him that Seu Ramos turned when he asked for the death of his enemies, and he was granted the favor. When cemetery watchmen find black dogs at the entry gates around midnight, their

throats slit and their paws bound in red ribbon, it is a sign that Exu has been asked to make some particularly gruesome and difficult intervention. Lighted candles at crossroads—visible everywhere on Friday evenings—are also requests for his help. Seu Midnight's purpose at Stella's session was not to oversee a great party but to grant equivocal favors to petitioners who in some way wanted to harm or control others. I asked Stella what she made of this.

"The main thing you have to understand about Exus is that they're spirits in evolution," she said. "They're not enlightened, so if you decide to use them you'd better know what you're getting into. I warn people, 'Whenever you ask for something evil, you're going to have to absorb part of that evil yourself.' Whether people want to seek out Exu despite that warning is something I can't control."

Stella seemed more concerned, however, about the impression the Exus might make on her congregation, which, as she frequently points out, consists largely of *gente fina*. She doesn't specifically mention the fact that many of her initiates are white, but a couple of her white assistants did make remarks to me to the effect that Stella was a very good person, even though she was black. The issue of race is present in Umbanda in precisely the same convoluted, fragmented, and deflected way that it is present in all aspects of life in Brazil. Heads of successful temples with large black congregations tell visitors that their temples are not "voodoo" centers, and cite as evidence the fact that many of the worshippers arrive in their own cars. (The rate of car ownership for blacks in Brazil is visibly low.) Practitioners of "white Umbanda" explain painstakingly that Indians and Old Black Folks don't really exist—that they are only the simple, accessible packaging the spirits came up with in order to address themselves to "maids who aren't really capable of understanding a dialogue about metaphysics," "maids" being one of the many code words for "blacks." "White Umbandistas" also explain that the African *orixás* are not really African gods but vibratory magnetic fields, and that their origins aren't really African anyway but Egyptian, or maybe Oriental. They despise the cult of the Exus. Stella,

however, thinks that Exus reflect a fundamental part of human nature, and she probably also thinks that they're good business. Her main concern is that they appear in a form that will not unduly shock those white people who come to her temple precisely because it has an Exu. "Exus can be educated, they can be helped," she says. "That's why in my sessions no Exu ever uses dirty words."

THE QUESTION OF the Exus' relationship to the Devil is part of the larger question of how Christian churches should relate to Umbanda, and that question has been around for a long time. During its first decades, when it was expanding dramatically, Umbanda was under attack by both the Catholic Church and the civilian authorities, as were Candomblé, samba music, and most other forms of black culture. Official persecution gradually gave way to mass acceptance, but as late as the nineteen-sixties Father Bonaventure Kloppenburg, an influential Franciscan theologian, could write, "In the face of the cult of the Exus, the Catholic's attitude is one of saintly horror, and he will repeat this always with apostolic vigor." For its pains, the Catholic Church found its places of worship increasingly empty, and had to modify its attitude drastically—to one of tolerant understanding. The new fundamentalist evangelical sects are making no such concessions, with the result that they can't build churches fast enough for all the worshippers who wish to cleanse themselves of the Umbanda sin, while even the oldest, most firmly established Umbanda temples are cutting back dramatically on the number of sessions they hold—to one a week, or even one a month. When I asked Átila Nunes, the Umbanda constituency's representative in the Rio state legislature, how Umbanda was doing in terms of growth, he said, "We have entered a phase of qualitative growth, after an initial phase of quantitative growth." In other words, the numbers are terrible.

Mariza de Carvalho Soares, an anthropologist who has studied both the Afro-Brazilian religions and the new evangelical churches, finds it logical that the sects should be taking droves of faithful away from the Afro-Brazilian religions. "The Christian

churches are based on an ethic of solidarity, whereas Afro-Brazilian religions are *disgregadoras*—they're all about conflict, enemies, and revenge," she told me on a recent morning. "They are religions that see individuals in permanent isolation and at odds with one another, much the way the *orixás* appear in the mythology." This is a time when Rio's social problems are setting people at one another's throats, she believes, and it would be hard to disagree: would-be passengers fight for the right to hang out the back door of an overcrowded bus; women fight over scarce and wayward men; self-appointed parking attendants fight over a hard-won half block's worth of turf. De Carvalho Soares is a funny, quick-witted, and gregarious woman, and, in the sense that she is both an academic and a homeowner, she belongs to the small minority of the relatively privileged, but in her tiny living room, as she raised her voice to a near-shout to make herself heard over the blast of yet another traffic jam, she seemed to be just another carioca struggling in a misshapen urban environment. "At this particular time, when everything in Brazilian society tends toward individual isolation, conflict, and a struggle for survival, Umbanda's atomizing tendencies are too much for people to handle," she told me.

PASTOR LAIME, one of many preachers who participate in an all-day schedule of services at the main Rio house of worship established by the Church of God Is Love, can't keep track anymore of how many houses of worship his church has. He debated with the receptionist outside his office whether the total was fifty-two hundred or fifty-four hundred, and finally settled on "five thousand and something" in Brazil alone, in addition to about three hundred temples in other Latin-American countries. In his office, separated from the temple itself by three flights of stairs and four electronically controlled gates, it was possible to talk quietly: there was only the sound of air-conditioning and, in the background, the piped-in voice of the pastor who was conducting the service downstairs, and whose sermon was being taped on a professional sound system. Five television screens silently monitored the security gates and the altar. Downstairs, however, the

pastor and a multidecibel sound system had to compete with the racket of incessant hammering as a construction crew worked around the clock to build extra balconies, where more pews could be fitted. Most of the newcomers to the church, Pastor Laime said, were fleeing the clutches of Satan. "Every time I hold a baptism—let's say there are fifteen hundred people present, six hundred will be former Umbandistas renouncing the Devil."

Fundamentalist evangelical sects like God Is Love, the Assembly of God, and the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God have been operating in Brazil for several decades. The oldest, the Christian Congregation in Brazil, was founded in 1910, by an Italian immigrant who passed through the United States on his way here and liked what he saw of the Pentecostal rituals in the Deep South. All the sects are invariably referred to as "the new sects," though, because their phenomenal growth has taken place only over the last twenty years, and because this period of growth coincides with the development of a new type of ritual, which is probably unlike that of any Protestant cult ever previously known. They rail against the Catholic Church, which they claim is an invention of the Devil, who hides behind every saint in the form of an *orixá*. At the Universal Church—by far the fastest-growing of the sects—preachers who are former Umbandistas conduct mass exorcisms of the *orixás*. They call the *orixás* demons, but also address them by name ("Come out, Xango! Come out, Ogum!"), and the *orixás* growl and curse more richly than they are ever allowed to at Stella's temple, but finally quit the bodies of their victims and flee the presence of Jesus Christ. In nearly all the new churches, flasks of oil or water are blessed and used for faith healing. At the Church of God Is Love—which also conducts *orixá* exorcisms—the faithful are encouraged to write letters to Jesus Christ requesting a miracle, and the letters deposited on the altar are prayed over by the preacher and a fervent congregation. The sects have made it easy for converts to renounce a lifelong association with Umbanda: they do not have to admit that the *orixás* do not exist—only that they are the Devil, and that God is stronger. And, in this country that so badly needs miracles, the possibility of supernatural benefits can-

not easily be overlooked. The preacher shouts over and over at the Church of God Is Love that the only true miracles, the best miracles, the biggest ones, are performed by Jesus Christ.

At nearly any hour of the day, it is possible to find one's way from President Vargas Avenue—the sixteen-lane slice of modernity that cuts through the run-down heart of colonial Rio—to the main house of worship of the Church of God Is Love by following the sound of chanting through the surrounding narrow streets. The stucco-decorated houses along these streets were once among the most delicate and charming in the city, but now their pink or blue façades are faded and crumbling, and they are occupied by electrical-supply stores, garages, and butcher shops. The main temple—a whitewashed warehouse from which songs issue all day long, at the end of a street barely wide enough for one car—blends easily into its surroundings.

When I arrived there in midafternoon a few days after my conversation with Pastor Laime, a preacher was warming up the congregation by lying on the ground behind the altar, so that only his voice, emerging through the sound system's gigantic speakers, held sway. It was hard to understand what he was shouting from this position, but that didn't seem to make much difference to the crowded house. The women sat to the left and the men to the right of the altar, which stands in front of a wall on which a large rainbow has been painted. To judge by the worshippers' knobby bone structure and threadbare clothing, they were among Rio's very poorest, and, to judge by their manner of praying, they needed a break. Some sat weeping silently. Some stood and prayed loudly, with their palms raised to Heaven. Several were kneeling up against the altar with their arms raised high, and others had flattened themselves against the booming speakers in order to feel the preacher's voice vibrating through their bodies.

Ushers—elderly women wearing uniforms and nametags—patrolled the aisles, taking up collections and handing out slips of paper on which the faithful could write letters to Christ. (Periodically, the ushers gathered up the letters in small butterfly nets and deposited them in a cardboard box on the altar, where, the

preacher assured everyone, they would soon be answered by Jesus Himself.) I noticed that a heavyset woman in a faded skirt and blouse sitting a few rows in front of me kept turning to stare in my direction. Soon she moved closer, struggling to fit herself and an overstuffed plastic supermarket bag she carried in lieu of a handbag into a small space next to me. "I don't know how to write," she said as soon as she sat down. "Will you write my letter for me?" Then she dictated it in rapid bursts, pausing hardly long enough between thoughts for me to get the words down.

"Dear Lord Jesus Christ," she began. "This is from Maria da Conceição. Please help me find a job. And bless my daughter and tell her to stop screaming and yelling at me. I know it's not her but the Devil that's making her do it, but still she just won't listen to sense. Tell her yourself to stop being an Umbandista, you know she never pays any attention to me. And her husband, who's worthless—at least help him find a job, so that both of them can move out, and so he can earn enough money to help feed the kids. And bless João and Gerónimo and Zé Carlos and Zezinho and Nilse and Ilcemar."

When I later asked Pastor Laime, who is a serious, intensely religious young man, what God Is Love could do to improve the lot of its faithful, he answered straightforwardly that that was not the church's task—that God did not want His worshippers to be more interested in material things than they were in Him. He admitted reluctantly, however, that many people's lives do improve when they quit Umbanda and join God Is Love. He cited himself as proof, saying, "Before I joined the church, I was smoking two packs a day. That's money. You save even more when you stop drinking, and it gets easier to hold down a job. And Umbanda costs a lot of money—all those offerings, the costumes, the parties. They add up."

God Is Love costs a lot of money, too. Believers are expected to turn over a tenth of their income to the church, and also to buy Bibles, hymnals, and records of church music. During the services, collections are taken up constantly, and the preacher will often begin by asking those who want to demonstrate their faith to display a large-denomination cruzeiro bill. ("I want to see

four people holding a five-thousand-cruzeiro bill. Let's give them all a round of applause!") In addition, Maria da Conceição told me proudly, it was a major sacrifice for her to put the money together for the suburban train that brought her to the church every day. She showed me the Bible she was paying for on the installment plan—one more sacrifice for God. I asked if someone at home read it to her, and she said the Bible itself talked to her when she prayed to it.

The new evangelicals not only ask for money outright but also boast of their wealth—which is proof of Christ's support—by building larger and larger churches and setting up more and more elaborate television programming, whereas Umbanda principles state unconditionally that "blessings aren't paid for." It is only by charging for "consultations" and by relying on wealthy patrons—who will often make a cash contribution in return for a miracle—that the head of an Umbanda temple can make a living. But love potions aren't as important as jobs, and if someone like Maria da Conceição can begrudge the *orixás* the money her daughter spends for their ritual candles and food offerings, while herself giving unstintingly to the church from her meagre funds, it's because the *orixás* and the Exus don't seem to be able to perform the kinds of miracles that people need these days.

A SELF-EMPLOYED handyman I know says that the help of an evangelical church—the Assembly of God—is what has kept him and his wife not only married to each other for fifteen years but also happy about it. In the favela of Vidigal, where family life is often violent and chaotic, this is a feat so remarkable as to make some of Jamin and Maria Tereza Mendonça Merense's neighbors consider conversion. Jamin, a birdlike, intensely curious and restless man, is lucky in other ways, too. He is well-off even by the standards of Vidigal, which is easily the most prosperous and consolidated of all Rio's favelas. He has a car, which serves him well as he makes the rounds of his clients, most of them well-paying foreigners. True, he has to park the car about half a mile away from where he lives, because that is where the nearest road is, and it takes him about half an hour to coax the aging vehicle

out of the steep, hillside chicken yard that serves as a parking lot. Yet there the car is, a venerable American model vast enough to accommodate his entire extended family. He has a house, which he built himself. So do all his neighbors, but Jamin, because he is an exceptionally thoughtful, thrifty, and industrious craftsman, was able to figure out ways of building three stories of fairly stable brick and concrete on top of a one-room brick shack his wife inherited long ago. The house looms skyscraperlike over its neighbors, and from its top story one can see not only the crazy jumble of tilting brick houses, winding alleys, trash dumps, open sewers, and surviving bits of forest which make up Vidigal but also a far more awe-inspiring expanse of beach and ocean than that enjoyed by guests at the Sheraton Hotel, which lies at the foot of Vidigal hill.

Jamin, whom I have known for years, was happy to take me on a tour of his living room, tiled bathroom, master bedroom with balcony (ocean view), and terraced top-floor work-and-play area, where his wife has her knitting machines, and their children—two girls and a boy—have a rusty seesaw and a swing. From the terrace he pointed out less populated areas farther uphill, where the local drug traffickers have their hideaways, and the nearby neighborhoods of Ipanema and Leblon, where many of Vidigal's residents find jobs as maids or construction workers. Leaning against the railing, one small bare foot resting on the instep of the other, skinny arms folded against his chest, he reflected again on his luck, and on where he would be today if he and the beautiful Tereza had not found their way years ago to the Church of the Assembly of God.

Tereza, who has a large capacity for introspection and a seeming inability to paper over unpleasant facts, tells the story more precisely. She met Jamin when she was fifteen years old. He was working as a delivery boy, while she was working in an office, washing dishes and preparing the little cups of coffee that Brazilians drink all day long. She is very black and Jamin is classified as white—a combination that is not unheard of in serious relationships here but isn't common, either. Her friends warned him away: "That girl is insolent. She's going to give you a *bad*

time. You're spending too much money on her." She wasn't wild about him, but when she mentioned that she liked to knit he took all his savings and bought her a little knitting machine. They moved in together, but soon Tereza decided that he would drive her crazy with his doglike devotion and suffocating jealousy. She left him, and then she discovered that she was pregnant.

Tereza told me this story while she combed her two lovely daughters' masses of bouncy, ringleted hair and tied it with ribbons. Tereza keeps the girls and the little boy dressed in picture-perfect pastels and sees to it that the children have pleasant manners. There is an orderliness about her—an emotional discipline—that one rarely finds among people in a very poor urban environment, but she told me that she was not always that way. When the first baby was born, she said, she used to keep it locked in the crawl space below the shack, so that she wouldn't have to hear its crying. She would struggle all day to calm her nerves, but when she heard Jamin trudging up the path in the evening, her heart would start beating in anguish. Soon she would be yelling horrible things at him. "She was sarcastic," Jamin recalls. "Whatever plan I came up with, however I tried to please her, she would cut me down. She made me feel worthless." They did not speak to each other except when they were quarrelling.

It was because she was in a complete state of despair that Tereza agreed to let a neighbor take her to an Assembly of God church service one afternoon, and although she didn't like the shouting and the chanting that went on there, she was interested in some pamphlets her neighbor gave her which had to do with the family. She read that women should obey their husbands in everything, and not talk back to them; that they should not go to parties where provocative music is played; and that they should dress modestly. There were instructions on child care. In the favelas, many children are disciplined through beatings, and it is not uncommon for them to be chained for hours at a time, either as punishment or to keep them safe while the parents are at work. The pamphlets forbade child-beating and all other forms

of child abuse, along with wife-beating and drinking and gambling. They defined a role for each member of the family and provided instructions on how to fill it.

Tereza took Jamin to the Assembly meetings. She began guitar lessons, and she and Jamin practiced hymns together until late at night. She stopped talking back to him, and noticed that his jealous fits eased almost immediately. They discussed child-rearing methods and the homemaking suggestions in the pamphlets, and applied them. They were so excited by all these new ideas and methods that they hardly noticed that their relationship had changed until, sitting up in bed late one night, they suddenly realized that they had been having their first conversation. They were in love.

Umbanda's strength has been the ability to imagine an alternative reality better than the present dreary one, but to a large extent the evangelical sects' genius is to have helped their followers *change* reality. Never mind that most of the worshippers' most ambitious letters to Jesus remain unanswered; Tereza wears high-cut blouses and below-the-knee skirts and keeps her husband happy, and more and more women in the favelas are becoming convinced that doing that is miracle enough. Converts are instructed in the virtues of formality, punctuality, and self-control, and the lesson has proved so successful that many job interviewers will give "believers" preference in hiring, particularly for unskilled jobs. Despite these clear benefits, Protestant sects are unpopular in the media and among many intellectuals, on the basis of their puritanism and what is seen as their Yankee origin. One intellectual who isn't bothered is Darcy Ribeiro, the near-legendary anthropologist and leftist politician, who, despite surgery to remove one cancerous lung nearly a decade ago, continues to spout ideas, articles, and government projects—he drafted Governor Brizola's plan for daylong schools with two square meals—at an undiminished pace.

"The sects are a form of worship that has found a way to dignify the lower-income sectors," he said cheerily the other day, brushing aside objections that the new churches deal in snake oil and siphon money out of the pockets of people who desperately

need it. "This is a class of people who want to discover the values that will allow them a stable family life and respectability. It's a class that suffers enormously from the effects of alcoholism: every Friday night, the husband comes home pickled in *cachaça*, he beats his wife, and then he gets on top of her. Umbanda has no religious morality; basically, it's a lumpen ethic and so, of course, it has had to suffer in the face of this new cult, which is so full of family virtues, protects children, and has a very strong notion of sin. There have probably never been so many virgins in Rio as now! The Catholic Church always preached about the family, but the fact is that there has never been much family life in Brazil; in the upper classes, it's all hypocrisy, and what has prevailed among the poor is the model of the heroic mother raising a family that is poorer with every new child. Also, the new churches have a Brazilian *jeito*—a Brazilian way of doing things. That is particularly true of the Assembly of God, but all the others are nonhierarchical and informal, too. They're growing like weeds."

Actually, the Assembly of God is not growing at the same exorbitant rate as the God Is Love and the Universal Churches, perhaps because its *jeito* isn't quite Brazilian enough. The Assembly combats Umbanda and practices faith healing, but what draws crowds is the rapturous theatrics of its younger competitors. I asked Father Valdelí Carvalho da Costa, a Jesuit priest who wrote a dissertation on Umbanda, why religion in Brazil tends toward the extravagant and the magical, and he answered that this is a reflection of the Brazilian soul. "We live in a mythic universe," he said. "It comes from our African and Indian roots, and it's much more fluid and all-encompassing than Catholicism—which is the official religion. This universe is inhabited by all Brazilians, from the most illiterate slumdweller to a novelist like Jorge Amado, who has been both a member of the Communist Party and a follower of Candomblé. It's as if this mythic mentality were a parallel atmosphere we float in. Everything is always in flux, always changeable. As in the stories about men who turn into jaguars and jaguars who turn into armadillos, transformations are always possible."

"We believe in what we see," I was told by the sociologist

Mariza da Costa, who is an initiate in Candomblé. "I believe in the *orixás* because I see them. The Western perception that one should believe in what one can control is the complete opposite of this. People who come from abroad to look at the Afro-Brazilian religions are always asking me 'Do you really believe in this?' I tell them that in those terms one has to make a distinction between belief and faith. I have faith."

THERE WAS TINGLING excitement in the air at the Spiritist Tent of Father Gerónimo one night as the initiates changed out of their white Umbanda uniforms into red-and-black costumes for the Devil-like Exus. Mother Marinete, who inherited the temple from her father, the Gerónimo of its name, had invited me earlier in the day to attend this session, which she was holding at the request of her followers to replace a session she'd had to cancel because of a trip abroad. "The women love the *pombagiras*," she said, grinning. "They wouldn't miss that for the world." All the women looked beautiful when they emerged from the dressing room, ready to receive the *pombagira* spirits: middle-aged or very young, fair-skinned or very black, they had stuck flowers in their hair, rubbed garish red lipstick on their mouths, and added a certain nonchalant sway to their walks as they strolled about the temple in expectation of the spirits. The temple that Father Gerónimo created is certainly a place where magical things can happen. Its courtyard, which is reached through a long, narrow alleyway from a quiet suburban street, is full of shrines where homemade representations of the *orixás* glow in the light of candles set there by their devotees. Two enormous palm trees, which Mother Marinete calls her antennae, poke through the floor of the theatre-size ceremonial hall, which is all white, and through its tentlike ceiling. In the courtyard that evening, the palm fronds framed a full moon.

There aren't many temples like this one left in central Rio, Mother Marinete said, standing in the moonlight in an African tunic, a glittery turban framing her smooth, round face. There aren't many temple heads who can afford all that real estate, she explained. She gave up her law practice to take over the temple

after her father became ill, a couple of years ago, and now she makes ends meet through the contributions of tourists, who regularly arrive in busloads from South Zone hotels to watch the sessions, but if she hadn't inherited the temple she probably wouldn't have been able to set one up on her own. Mother Marinete has great faith that there is about to be a second expansive wave of Umbanda, and that this time it will occur abroad, thanks to the influence of people like the foreigners who come to visit her out of curiosity and leave with the seed of Umbanda in them. In fact, the reason she had had to cancel the regularly scheduled Exu session was that she had gone to inaugurate a congress on Afro-Brazilian religion organized by some of her father's disciples in Argentina. She thinks that Argentines and other foreigners are attracted to what they see in her temple because in their own daily lives they have no contact with their ancestors, and that anyone is lost who is out of touch with his past. But she also thinks that she makes converts because people can see for themselves that Umbanda works. "It's all scientific," she said, and she pointed out a woman emerging from the dressing room. The woman was epileptic, she said, but had suffered from attacks much less frequently since she began coming to the temple. Then she spoke of a man who is now one of her principal assistants, and whom her father had rescued off the street when he was alcoholic and crazy. "The point is that we can control access to the trance state through breathing, and proper breathing balances the spirit and allows people to be in harmony with the world," she said.

Nevertheless, Mother Marinete acknowledged, there are major problems with Umbanda in Rio these days. There are hustlers and quacks all over the place, and the evangelical churches have known how to take advantage of people's anger with bad Umbanda. And there is the problem of transmitting Umbanda knowledge. "Most of the temple leaders who have real roots, real traditional knowledge, come from very poor and ignorant backgrounds, and they haven't known how to pass on their wisdom," she said. "But I notice that there is a great surge of young people from academic backgrounds who are coming here and to other

temples to find out what it is we know, and I think the next generation of religious leaders will come from them." She smiled and shook her head. "It isn't easy. Being a Mother of a Saint"—the head of a temple, who can initiate people into the cult of the *orixás*—"requires a lot of juggling. In the sessions, I very rarely incorporate my saint, because I am taking care of everyone else—making sure the novices don't hurt themselves or get frightened, seeing to it that the people who come in looking for help find it. And then I have to deal with the outside world. Things are very crazy in Rio—the city isn't what it used to be. I have to deal with all these little drug-trafficking kids who come in here thinking they can expect favors from me. And with muggers who think I have something to steal. And with the people who want to join the evangelicals and with those who want to come back. A lot of them do, you know."

Inside the temple, the initiates had covered the altar holding the statue of Christ with a curtain, so that He would not be forced to see the Devil having his way. They had laid out a red-and-black cloth on the floor and set on it cigars, bottles of beer, red roses, and red and black candles. Now the men began to uncork bottles of cider, and every time a bottle popped, a large crowd of suppliants sitting along the sides of the ceremonial area applauded joyfully. Then drumming started. A black woman with a deep, gritty voice sang the praises of Exu Who Clears Paths and Closes Gates. Soon the spirits arrived. They cackled and leered inside their worshippers' bodies and lurched around wildly, calling more spirits in, and even taking possession of non-initiate suppliants, whipping their bodies about and throwing them to the floor. The entire congregation became engaged in the Exus' urgent and mysterious business as the temple took on the air of an agitated but very friendly insane asylum.

I left the temple and travelled across the city, to a chrome-and-marble meeting hall in a neighborhood near the lustrous bay front, where hundreds of sweaty believers prayed loudly to Jesus for a miracle while on the dais above them three preachers roared simultaneously into microphones, exhorting the Devil to be gone. The crowd's fervor virtually guaranteed that a miracle

would occur, and the same was true at the temple of Granny Maria Antonia, where Stella's followers were welcoming the old slave spirits, who twisted their devotees' bodies with arthritis and old age and filled their souls with wisdom. A short time later and a couple of miles away, a small crowd gathered around the miraculous statue of Our Lady of Fátima, brought here by Portuguese Catholics to make a tour of her churches. She was travelling through Brazil in a minivan, encased in a Lucite box, and as she rode into the night her devotees sang farewell and waved goodbye from the steps of a small church. Down the street, on a dark corner, half a dozen women dressed in white set out an offering to Exu of the Seven Crossroads, which glowed with the light of a score of candles until, suddenly, a sharp wind rose and snuffed them out. It was Friday night in Rio, and all the spirits were at work.