

# Review

Giumbelli, Emerson (2014), *Símbolos Religiosos em Controvérsia*. São Paulo: Terceiro Nome.

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In a time when the concept of ‘symbol’ seems to be falling into the margins of anthropological debate, the book *Símbolos Religiosos em Controvérsias* (Religious Symbols in Controversies), by Emerson Giumbelli, offers us an important reminder that symbols *still do* matter. Decades after the contributions of Keesing, Geertz, Turner, Douglas and others, we realize that matters of representation, iconicity and metaphor still seem to play an important role in the way we relate to each other and engage in political activity. The viewpoint that supports this argument stems from a field plagued with symbols, symbolisms and symbolistics: religion. When we observe the public display of religious affairs in contemporary politics, we can easily identify the role notoriously played by symbols in them: a scarf, a mosque, a crucifix, a book, a legislative act, a statue, a painting, etc.

Giumbelli’s book, however, is not so much interested in a conceptual (theological or anthropological) debate on symbol and representation, but instead works on top of the operative-ness and effectiveness of symbols in social life, how symbols become active markers in our daily lives, acquiring social and political significance. The hinge here is thus ‘controversy’, or the recognition of sites and spaces of dispute among several actors in what is often referred to as the ‘public sphere’. In this point, Giumbelli is cautious in his refusal to configure a normative conception of the public sphere, preferring to work with processes through which religion “becomes public” (p.13), builds its audiences and becomes politically agent through diverse mechanisms, devices and protagonists. In conclusion, ‘controversy’ interestingly appears here not so much as a topic, but rather as a Latourian heuristic device that allows for the understanding of contemporary religion and politics through processes that are necessarily dialectical and inherently controversial. This strikes me as a particularly attractive methodology, as it counteracts the tendency towards self-containment and coherence that accounts of religious movements often muster, analyzing phenomena “in

their own terms”, in a similar monolithic fashion as the worldviews produced by such movements.

From this perspective, this is a book that emerges from Giumbelli’s longstanding research agenda of intersecting anthropology, history, religious studies, political theory and philosophy, in which questions of modernity, pluralism, secularism, regulation, iconoclasm, blasphemy and heresy have become linchpin and contributed to an already extremely rich field of inquiry (the anthropology of religion in Brazil and South America). In this particular sense, it works as a digest of the author’s arguments and reflections on the intersection of religion and politics throughout his (already exceedingly productive) career, and more particularly over the past six years.

The book therefore displays (or, should I say, locates) the argument in ten different places, sites or objects. The first chapter, for instance, begins with a painting (*A Pátria*, by Pedro Bruno), which acts as a pretext for a reflection on the role of religious symbols in the process of determination of laic governance and nationhood in the First Brazilian República (1889-1930). Here, civic and religious (Christian) pantheons, instead of competing, actually blend in the process of emblemization that occurred in the period of Brazilian nationbuilding. Chapter 6, on the other hand, looks at crucifixes and their protagonism in contemporary Brazilian state buildings—notably, Dilma Roussef’s own cabinet—, roughly one hundred years after the processes described in the first chapter of the book. In a similar process as observed in southern European countries, the presence of crucifixes in public architecture became, in the turn of the twenty-first century, a matter of juridical dispute, political strategy and historical debate. In such dialectics, the main question was in fact, the identification of crucifixes as explicitly religious symbols, and subsequently the acknowledgment of their political agency as objectifications, visible materializations of ideological precepts. Chapter 9, in turn, focuses on the work of evangelical and Pentecostal movements towards creating a public venue in which their message is able to circulate. Here, Giumbelli speaks about a specific “evangelical public culture” (p.193) that counteracts (and competes with) two other poles: Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian religions. We can observe this public culture in specific media and channels, from television to sports (and soccer in particular), music (the so-called *gospel brasileiro*) and, finally, favelas and prisons. One particular episode, the *vagões de culto* (loosely translated here as “church wagon”) movement, in which the

trains of the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro became spontaneous spaces of preaching and evangelization in recent years, illustrates the process of ‘occupation’ performed by evangelical and Pentecostal movements in urban Brazil, ultimately unfolding into architectural statements contesting the ‘Catholic tradition’, with the emergence of cathedrals and monuments.

But the central set of chapters focuses on the Brazilian iconic *supra summum*, at least in what comes to touristic flyers, selfies and what not: the Cristo Redentor (Christ the Redeemer) statue in the Corcovado mountain of Rio de Janeiro. For Giumbelli, the Cristo Redentor is indeed iconic, but also because of how it turns manifest, makes visible, attracts spotlight. From this perspective, through a genealogical, historical approach, he identifies the multiplicity of intersections that the construction and public implantation of the Cristo Rei summoned: between the religious and the secular, the state and the individual, conservatism and modernity, materiality and representation, the sacred and the commodified, etc. It illustrates, perhaps as no other monument in Brazil, the power of symbolism, to the point that we reach an interesting conundrum: stripped of the political, historical and cultural appropriations and envelopings, the Cristo Redentor is in fact a religious monument, a representation of Jesus Christ; however, if we zoom out and observe it within the wider context, it becomes an example of transcendence of the religious and invitation into the secular.

Giumbelli’s analysis of the Cristo Redentor—and all the other elements that populate the religious and political public sphere of Brazil and beyond—makes this book a particularly timely contribution to the anthropology and sociology of religion in Brazil, as an ‘itinerary of religious controversy’ through which we acknowledge the complex politics behind contemporary religious phenomena. Although the book is not framed in such a fashion, it is also an invitation towards a comparative reflection. Even considering the problem of historiographical incomparability, as famously addressed by Marcel Detienne in his book *Comparing the Incomparable* (2008, Stanford University Press), Giumbelli opens the door, through his brief comparisons with the French context, to an interrogation of the multiple connections that allow for the emergence of a public space within and beyond the apparent determinacy of nation and national politics. After all, is the Cristo Redentor a Brazilian, Carioca, Christian or touristic symbol?