

Shameless Theology

S2:05 - Christian Perpetrators of Violence: Documenting Religious Racism with Dr. Danielle Boaz & Dr. Gustavo Melo Cerqueira, Part 1

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 00:09

Welcome to Shameless Theology, a space for honest, courageous conversations with queer, trans, and feminist people of faith and our allies. This podcast is brought to you by Soulforce, who is an international organization working to end the religious and political oppression of LGBTQIA plus people and all marginalized people by breaking open the ideologies of white Christian supremacy. I'm Reverend Alba Onofrio, also known as Reverend Sex. I'm the executive director at Soulforce, and I am honored and delighted to be your host as we dive into the thick of it.

This season is exciting because it goes deep on the ideas of our brand new book called *Spiritual Violence, Religious Phenomena That Defile the Faith*. Together we'll learn new concepts like spiritual trauma, religious abuse, spiritual terrorism, white Christian supremacy, and spiritual violence. Together we name the harm, not as abstract theories, but as lived realities. But we don't stop there because theory work is only as good as the path it leads to healing, and we'll be doing plenty of that too. These conversations are part idea session, part theological reflection, and part testimony.

You'll hear stories of resilience, liminality, code switching, theological imagination, and a kind of dogged persevering hope that refuses to let go of the sacred, even when our institutions fail us. Whether you're here because you have questions, or because you are healing, teaching, leading, or simply trying to make sense of your own experience, you are so very welcome here. You are not alone on this journey. Now let's get down to business, and pleasure, with Shameless Theology. Spiritual terrorism and spiritual violence that we're experiencing in the United States is not new, and it's not even unique to us.

Today we are bringing you a great conversation with two remarkable scholars, Dr. Danielle Boaz and Dr. Gustavo Melo Cerqueira, who have spent almost a decade working together on an important project documenting and raising awareness around religious racism in Brazil. Their research helps us to demonstrate the pattern of violence that rises to a level of spiritual terrorism. You know, when we chose to use the word terrorism in our book, there was people who were uncomfortable with that, suggested that we were exaggerating or being sensationalist.

But projects like this one provide advocates with the data that we need to be able to raise awareness and effect change. Their research draws a clear connection between incidents of persecution and Christian perpetrators. There is so much packed into this conversation, so we're going to split it into two parts. This week, we'll hear from Daniel and Gustavo about how their work came to be, and how it started as a cry for help and a fight for survival. We'll consider how their lived experience and research into the prohibition and persecution of African diasporic religious traditions across the Americas relates to the concepts presented in Soulforce's new book, and we'll discuss the ways that religion colludes with power to produce harm.

A couple of notes. This conversation was originally recorded last year, and so a lot has happened since then that isn't really addressed here, but I believe that the concepts are still deeply, deeply

relevant to our lived experience now. You'll hear from me, and from Nadia, and also Karina Vargas, who was one of the primary writers of our book project in Spanish, and was a part of this project as we transferred it into English. All right. Here it is. The first of our conversations with Dr.

Danielle Boaz and Dr. Gustavo Melo Cerquera. Thank you all so much for saying yes, we're like incredibly excited. We've been waiting a long time to have this conversation, but to get us started, will you tell us a little bit about what brought you to this work? Why is it important to you? How did you get here? This is a pretty specific topic, talking about issues of white Christian supremacy and all of us who are working to end that in different forms for the purpose of the liberation of our people.

So please tell us a little bit about how'd you get here? How did we get here? What brought you to this work?

Dr. Danielle Boaz | 04:53

That's kind of a long story, and I think to make it as brief as possible, or to make it make sense as much as possible, I would just say that, so I started off as an attorney. And when I was going to law school, I started to learn about a lot of the limitations that came about during colonialism in the Caribbean, South America, to a lesser extent, the United States on African diaspora religions. It wasn't that law school taught us about that because it certainly doesn't, but I was doing an independent project looking at, of all things, environmental or what was it?

It was international environmental law and looking at deforestation in Haiti. And it turns out that you can't start talking about the environment and start talking about the history of how the environment of Haiti has been destroyed without talking about religion and talking about colonization and talking about the importance of the environment in African diaspora religions such as Haitian Vodou and how Vodou practitioners historically have wanted to protect the environment. But the colonists can destroy the environment basically from the arrival of the French in Haiti.

Things just kind of snowballed from there. I did a graduate program focusing on intercultural human rights, and I did my graduate thesis looking at the history of the prohibition and prosecution of African diaspora religions. And just to kind of work with some definitions here. So we're talking about like Cuban Santeria Lugumi, we're talking about Haitian Vodou, Brazilian Candomblé, Umbanda, Cuban Palo Mayombe, and some people would include Rastafari, Obia, Vodou, and Vodou in the United States as well. The definition of what would be considered an African diaspora religion would be a bit fluid.

But so I looked at the history of the prohibition and prosecution of these religions and discovered that basically at some point in the history of the Americas, all of these religions had been prohibited. And in Catholic colonies in particular, this was a policy, a process that came about because Catholicism was the only legitimate religion. Also, a big influence behind this was that these religions, religious leaders, were often involved in slave rebellions. So African diaspora religions were prohibited because they were seen as threatening to the institution of slavery.

They were seen as an alternative source of organization and law, authority and protection. This was very dangerous in colonial societies. I discovered after that that I really wanted to pursue this further. And law school doesn't really give you any kind of a basis for being a researcher. So glutton for punishment, I went back and did another graduate program and I got my doctorate in history.

And I studied the history of the prohibition of not only African diaspora religions, but also I looked at African religions that were prohibited as witchcraft on the African continent.

But not to kind of invalidate that or to use that law degree that I spent so much time and money getting, I am licensed. I practiced law while I was in graduate school. And then now I volunteer for religious communities, for African diaspora religious communities to try to advocate for their rights and freedoms when when those rights are being violated. To my knowledge, I'm the only attorney in the US who focuses on this kind of stuff. Then to kind of bring it into how did I get to the the Latin American context of this?

A lot of that had to do with meeting Baba Gustavo, my colleague, who's also on this conversation and learning about what was happening in Brazil and realizing that probably more so than any other place except for perhaps Haiti, the violence, the persecution, the prosecution that was happening during the colonial period has resurfaced and maybe is even more intense than it was at times during colonialism. And so it's it became a question not only of how do we understand the repercussions of a long history of persecution, but how do we understand what's happening today as kind of a resurfacing, a new manifestation of a lot of stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination that began to reinforce the institution of slavery.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 09:48

Well, that is amazing and sexy and brilliant and not wanting to interrupt your audio, but my goodness, that is amazing. And you are so are people and exactly who we need to be talking to and learning from and getting put in the chat. You don't want to mess with the lawyer who takes history seriously. And that is so true, which is a big part of this project to try to connect what is what happened historically that's still present today, that we're still living, that we're still trying to heal from.

So I'm excited to get into this conversation. OK, Gustavo, Cuentanos, tell us what how did you get here? How did you come to this work?

Dr. Gustavo Melo Cerqueira | 10:30

Well, first of all, thanks for having me here. And I think I regret that I said that Danielle should go first, because what can I say now? But anyways, I'll try. Being really direct to the point, what brings me here is a fight for survival. I usually say that I'm not necessarily advocating for communities or peoples. I am doing that in a way that I am part of it. In 2017, I was already kind of a young priest in Candomblé. It happened in 2016.

And then when we get to 2017, my la-Lorixá passed away. And right after that, lots of different community territories in Rio de Janeiro and more specifically in the city of Nova Iguaçu, which is the place where the Candomblé, where I was initiated, is located. And my la-Lorixá had died at that point, but kind of a couple of months after her death, lots of different communities had been attacked and burned down and lots of people have been tortured and all kinds of stuff were happening there.

So I got really concerned about that, not only because it had to do with it was really close to the community that I was part of, but also because that was the result of something that was really spreading out in Brazil, which was the advancement of the far right in dialogue with the

advancement of the far right in Brazil was the advancement of the neo-Pentecostal version of Christianity. So that you can have some ideas. So I'm talking about 2017, but a couple of years before that, in 2015, lots of different community territories were burned down in Distrito Federal, in the federal district in Brasilia, in around Brasilia, which means that the federal capital of Brazil, lots of community territories were burned down at that point.

And that was pretty much the same year that kind of some militias were being created, associated to some religious organizations in Brazil, especially the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. They're creating some militias to combat and fight against the evil and everything. And we know that historically in Brazil, Afro-Brazilian religions, not only religions, but Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions as a whole are being seen either as primitive or either as evilish. So in a way, we are either savage or we worship the devil.

So what happens is that when they say that they need to fight against the evil, they need to put down the evil, they need to put down the devil, usually they are mentioning that they need to put us down. So all the signs and symbols that they use in their TV programs and everything, they allude to Candomblé and other religions of African descent. So we were suffering all that attack that comes not only with that idea of a form of explicit violence, but it was also reinforcing an environment of fear and violence that we live in.

For example, when I tell you that I was a young priest in 2017, I am saying that I was assuming the community Tejedó that was founded by my great grandfather. Although Candomblé is really part of my family, part of our roots, part of our ancestry, I was raised as a Catholic, not as a person of Candomblé, because it was really common at a certain point in life that people were kind of denying that they belonged to Candomblé and they would not like their descendants to be part of that.

So they would put us away from that. They said, no, no, no, do not get involved into this because of all the fear and suffering that they had gone through. They didn't want their descendants to be part of that. But we also know that the divine and the spirituality has its own and their own paths. And some of us that were not even raised within it, they just come back to that and they kind of rescue parts of the family to get to that again.

So in my case, it happens almost at the same time that I traveled to the United States to do my graduate program, where I do my master's and my PhD program at the University of Texas at Austin. And so all that violence explodes here in Brazil. And I'm far from here watching what's happening and really concerned about everything. That's when I decided to do a kind of a seminar, an encounter with different people, Brazilian people who live in Austin and also lots of different people from the University of Texas at Austin, kind of to cry for help.

Like to say, you know what, we need to give international visibility to what's happening in Brazil. Otherwise, Brazilian state is not going to take care of us or take care of what's happening, especially because when I talk about you with the growth of the new Pentecostal religion in Brazil, I'm saying I'm talking about lots of politicians who are part of these Christian stream in Brazil, who are part of this Christian new Pentecostal version in Brazil. So these people kind of secure the power of these churches so that they can commit acts of violence against us and not being punished for that.

So I was really in a kind of a desperation state when I said we need to do an encounter here to talk about this and bring some international visibility to this, because maybe this is going to be the best

way to make people understand what's happening in Brazil. And maybe that's the case that Brazil is going to say, you know what, people are talking so many bad things about us. We feel embarrassed. So maybe we're going to do something. And it was because of that encounter that a professor who was participating in that also knew Dr.

Danielle Boaz and said, well, maybe Danielle should meet this student there at the University of Texas. And then she said, you know what, let me let me get his contact. And then we we made a contact and then we started working together and we worked together since 2017 in all these issues. And and that's pretty much what we are doing in terms of different reports, different forms of action. I'm also working with different organizations in Brazil, like the Race Inequality Institute, the ONCREOLA and different community territories, also participating in international political instance.

And I could see that I think that kind of part of my mission is also making this international branch of our struggle to make people from outside Brazil to know what's happening here.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 18:15

Amazing, amazing. Thank you for sharing that. It's hard. And I know that that those of us who do this advocacy work, we talk about some of the horrors so often that we're able to like just name it. And I want to just like take a breath to be like, that's a lot, friend, like that's a lot that we've each shared and that we will continue to share in this conversation. And we get really good at being able to communicate it so that we aren't well, I don't know about y'all, but so that I'm not falling apart every time I'm sharing about the things that are happening in my community.

But I just want to name like, oh, like that's a lot. And I'm so grateful for you to be able to come and also for us to be able to have this conversation in English, because I think so many of us in the US, we often don't leave the country. We don't speak other languages. And so we are often left completely like distant and lacking of what's actually happening in the world, especially when it kind of goes against the narratives of Christianity being good and perfect.

But I want to highlight two things that you said before we move on to the next question just to connect concepts. Right. So this we talk about this a lot in Soulforce, that this idea of spiritual violence or white Christian supremacy, this collusion that happens between religion and places of power, whether it's institutions, governments, that kind of thing. And people say, well, it's freedom of religion and we can say whatever we want. But I don't think that we often have such clear and direct examples of how, for example, us as an LGBT organization, when people in the pulpit equate homosexuality with the devil or trans people with, you know, Satan or demon and call us demon possessed and all those things that that moralizes and legitimizes and basically writes a blank check to any forces that want to cause us harm and say this is allowed and this is OK, or even worse, this is good and this is condoned by God.

So I want to just like I so I'm grateful for that such direct kind of example of how the rhetoric that happens in religious spaces directly impacts how people are able to behave in the world and gives a very clear direction of like this kind of thing will be punished or this kind of thing will be sanctioned. And that's really, really important. So that's one concept that I wanted to just lift out of that, of what you were saying. And the other one is spiritual terrorism.

And that is that sense of like we are never safe. There is a constant imposition. There's a constant threat of violence, even in our sacred spaces like our religious or spiritual spaces and practices and even in our communities. If we are associated with fill in the blank identity marker. And so I just want to name like for our audience, that level of constant pressure is the difference between spiritual violence, which happens to many of us in many forms because of an identity that we have that is not condoned by mainstream or white Christian supremacist logic and something that is level of terrorism, which is the point of that violence is to invoke fear.

And just like you said, Danielle, like it's because that is dangerous when we have different political orientation, we have different beliefs, when we have a higher power that says that we are worthy and that we should be free, that causes all kinds of problems for colonial states and settler colonialism in this country. So thank you for that. Thank you for connecting those dots. Thank you for helping us understand in real life. And thank you for that work. I'm going to pass it to Nadia for our second, our next question.

Nadia Arellano | 22:11

Yes, thank you so much. We've already started talking about this, but just to make it like more intentional, as you know, the core of the book is like naming five concepts that it's not that we are creating those concepts. We have seen those and we are trying to systematize and like start naming the nuances of each type of spiritual violence phenomena that we have seen throughout our work, throughout the 25 years of work that Soulforce has done under this bigger system of oppression that we have named white Christian supremacy, understanding that that is like the fertile ground for different ways of violence to operate through faith, religion.

These five concepts that we've created are white Christian supremacy, spiritual violence, spiritual terrorism, religious abuse and spiritual trauma. And each one of those has like specifics to it. And they work together on their systems of power and oppression. And they affect different people, whether they call themselves Christian or not, whether they live in the US or in other countries, they operate differently. We would love to hear your thoughts on these concepts and how do you think they relate to your work or they feel relevant or they feel not as relevant.

We understand that these things are things that you study and experience every day. And we want to hear your thoughts on how we frame them and how it interacts with your perspective on spiritual violence.

Dr. Danielle Boaz | 24:01

The terms that are most relevant to me, to the work that we're doing, is white Christian supremacy, spiritual violence, and spiritual terrorism. And all of these things intersect in ways that we've already started to talk about. And to really explain that a little bit more, I wanted to go back and just describe a little bit. One of the key projects that Gustavo and I worked on together is the development of this database of cases of what we call religious racism in Brazil, of discrimination and violence against Afro- Brazilian religious communities.

And this ranges everything from just discriminatory marks on social media, to the murder of religious leaders, the arson of temples, the destruction of religious artifacts. I mean, there's, I want to say, and I would be guessing, I don't know off the top of my head, I think that somewhere around 60% of the cases in that database are about violence against people and places of worship. So we

are largely talking about violence, but it includes other kinds of discrimination as well. And the reason that I bring this up is that, as Gustavo has already mentioned, one of the main tasks that we saw as being central to our work is first identifying that there is a pattern that the kinds of reports that people in Brazil might see in the news every now and then, oh, this temple was burned down, oh, a couple of them have been subject to arson in the same place in a short period of time, that this is much bigger than one or two isolated incidents, that this is the result of a pattern of discrimination and violence that permeates kind of every part of society.

Then the other piece of that was to bring visibility to this issue outside the US. And so the database is bilingual, it's English and Portuguese. And so the reason that I bring that up is because I see the need for something like this as being deeply relevant to these three concepts, especially to white Christian supremacy and spiritual terrorism. And as Reverend Alba already mentioned, one of the things that's really coming out of this is that, so let me backtrack for a moment and say that we found, and people in Brazil already kind of knew this, especially Afro- Brazilian religious communities already knew this, but we found that in the cases where the perpetrators of these acts of discrimination and violence could be identified, 100% were some form of Christian, be it Catholic, some unidentifiable affiliation of Christianity, or the ones who could be specifically traced to a form of Christianity or a particular church were largely involved with these neo-Pentecostal churches, this sect of evangelical Christianity in Brazil that is particularly fixated on this idea of being at war with the devil and African diaspora religious communities as being the manifestation of the devil.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 27:33

Wait, did you just say 100%?

Dr. Danielle Boaz | 27:37

Yeah, of the perpetrators who could be identified, yes.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 27:41

Yeah, yeah, 100%, just to like, note for self and audience, that's a resounding, clear connection between religion, Christianity in particular, being used for the service of violence. So just want to put a little exclamation point right there. Thank you, please continue.

Dr. Danielle Boaz | 28:00

No, no, and you're right to do so, because I often find myself glossing over that, because I know this fact, and I just say it like it's just nonchalant. But that's precisely the point that I'm trying to get to here, which is that, so the documenting of these 500 cases, and this is something that, these are cases that largely have happened in the past, like 10 years or so. So we're not talking about a long period of time. Technically, the database goes back to 2000.

But the vast majority of cases occurred in the five years prior to the last update that we've given to the database and the report, which was in 2022. So most of them have happened very recently. And to show that this pattern of violence, it rises to the level of spiritual terrorism. It creates this environment where people never feel safe. They don't feel confident, and it permeates every part of life. I mean, there are cases where somebody calls a ride share, and they just want to be picked up to go to the grocery store or something.

But they're dressed with some kind of religious attire. And the ride share driver says, you know what, I'm not taking people like you. I don't transport the devil in my vehicle. Or the same kind of thing if somebody's getting on a public bus. There are cases where teenagers have been assaulted by classmates. I mean, beaten very severely, just because somebody saw on social media, oh, somebody went to a Candomblé ceremony or something like that. And like I said, just this rampant attacks on places of worship, invasion of them, holding religious leaders at gunpoint, destroying sacred artifacts or forcing religious communities to destroy their own sacred artifacts.

I mean, it really is this environment of terrorism. And we can clearly attribute it to Christian perpetrators. And yet this is something, and this is to me, where the Christian supremacy part comes in. This is something that we don't hear about in the news. We don't hear about Christians being denounced as terrorists. And I belong to a lot of law and religion forums. And I've constantly given presentations about this stuff, published things about it. And I still often get pushback, especially from folks in the U.S., about, well, I don't know if we can call these people true Christians.

I mean, you know, Christians are carrying out violence in the name of... And it reminds me of... There was a survey done by the Pew Research Center, I believe, a few years ago that asked something to the effect of, if someone carries out violence in the name of Islam, are they a true Muslim? And a large percentage of respondents said yes, but then asked the same question, but replaced with Christianity. If someone carries out violence in the name of Christianity, are they a true Christian?

And a much smaller percentage of people said yes. And so there's this privilege that comes with being Christian, with being able to kind of exempt oneself from being the perpetrator of systematic forms of violence, and being able to say, my religion is not inherently violent. You know, my people are not out here committing acts of terrorism. And the work that I do, that we do, I think very much highlights that that is absolutely not the case.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 31:44

Absolutely, and totally connects with this orientation around white Christian supremacy in this white supremacist kind of colonial, like, all straight from colonization or settler colonialism in the U.S., which is like, and which happens all the time in the U.S., around white terrorism. Like, never do we hear, although most of the people committing random acts of violence that are specifically targeted at somebody because of an identity, is the identity of those assailants are white, almost always white men. And yet we never hear about white terrorism in the U.S.

Terrorism in the U.S. is an incredibly racially weighted word, and an incredibly, like, connected word with something like Islam. Like, those communities feel the real impact of that on a daily basis. And yet, by the numbers, we should be naming this white terrorism that also happens, but that connection around privilege is direct. And that also happens in Christianity. And I don't think that those of us who are Christian recognize how intense that is, that privilege is, and therefore, what responsibility it is for us, above everyone else, to be pissed, to be fighting against it, and to be taking an active part in the ending of that, and not just be like, well, that was just one individual.

And clearly, in the case of something like what y'all are explaining about communities in Brazil, and in Haiti, it's not one rogue individual, it's an entire system, like, a system behind a way of maneuvering that condones violence, and even encourages it. Gustavo, what would you add about

these concepts, and your experience, and what feels relevant?

Dr. Gustavo Melo Cerqueira | 33:33

Yeah, I was taking a look a little bit about the concepts here, and thinking, I think that first and foremost, the main idea that, or the main concept that we use here in Brazil, when we talk about Afro-Brazilian religions, is the idea of religious racism. And I do think that it connects a lot with the idea of spiritual terrorism. I was thinking that maybe spiritual trauma would also have to do with that. But maybe, and that's really, and it's really a terror to say, but maybe it doesn't connect that much with spiritual trauma, because one of the ideas of spiritual trauma is that we are talking about unpredictable and devastating events.

And it's hard to say that most of the violence we suffer is not unexpected, is not unpredictable. And that's the terror that we live in. I'll tell you that, for example, at my community, Terreiro, we are in a rural zone, and so we don't have that much protection, so only recently we could have internet and everything. And lots of criminal organizations are advancing in that area. And it's also part of how this Christian supremacy logic operates, and how that spiritual terrorism operates, is that lots of these criminal organizations and these drug dealers, they are Christians.

And they carry out the idea of Christianity, and Jesus, and David. And they put that in front of everything. And in some areas, like in Rio de Janeiro, they already have some territories that nobody can use, can wear clothes like this, that we make a reference to African culture. You should not wear white clothes on Fridays, because then they know that you are part of Candomblé, because that's part of our tradition on Fridays to wear white clothes. And they just prohibit and just expel people from those territories if they are part of this Candomblé culture, this Candomblé religion.

So in the area that my Candomblé is situated, when I see some of those criminal organizations advancing around, my biggest fear, I can confess this to you all, is not exactly that I'm going to be robbed or anything like that. My biggest fear is that one of those evangelical criminal organizations will advance to a point that they will try and burn down my community. That's the sensation that I keep feeling every day when I see on the news how they are killing each other.

Two pertinent events happened very recently in that idea that some things that happened with us are not unpredictable. And that also situates us in that idea of spiritual terrorism. And I'm going to talk a little bit more about religious racism as well. So I was at the Federal University of Reconcavo da Bahia a couple of weeks ago and talking about the advancement of these criminal organizations. And as I was there talking to a few people, just having fun on a Monday at 10 p.m.

in the streets, kind of really close to us, a couple of guys arrived. It was kind of, I don't know how to say that in English in terms of the unity of distance, but it was kind of less than 100 meters. In the distance, in the group of us. So a few, a couple of people just arrived, look at one guy and just shot the guy down. I think it was kind of 10 shots and it was very loud. It was something really, really bad.

And we had to run. We got one of the streets to run. And a few people came running after us. And one of them was screaming like, they killed my brother. They must confess to you, I was not feeling sorry for him that he lost his brother. I was afraid that he was running in the same street as us. And I was afraid that the guys would run after us and just start shooting. And I could just die in a very, in a way that, and the victim was part of also a different criminal organization.

So it was a struggle for territory. So if, and I'm telling you, I was in a kind of the main square of this small city. I was just beside this city hall building with a few people just walking around. It was not late at night. And that's how things are kind of happening. Last weekend, I was here in a seminar with a few people, not a few people, lots of people from Candomblé. And we were talking about an observatory that's going to be implemented here in Rio de Janeiro.

And there was a moment that the police had to be called because one of the hosts of the hotel where this, the meeting was happening, just said that it was kind of becoming impossible to take an elevator and just had to be dealing with all these people of Macumbeiros, which is a kind of expression that they use. And it's very derogatory of us Macumbeiros and fat people with all those clothes. We cannot just take the elevator and the thing like that.

We had to call the police and interrupt everything that was happening so that the police could grab that person and take it to jail. Fortunately, we had some authorities also participating in the meeting and those authorities were there to talk to the police. So the police had to take that person. Otherwise, probably it would not happen. So to live in this kind of environment where you need to think, well, where should I enroll my children? Which school my children is going to?

Every time I need to do that, we need to think, well, where that school is located? Who are the people that go there? Is there a kind of a religion prevalence in there? Because we do not want our children to suffer the kind of violence that some of us suffer. But when we talk also about religious racism and that dialogue with the spiritual terrorism, there is something that I need to call attention to, is that many times when we talk about religious racism, we are not talking about a very specific or direct form of violence that is clearly religiously motivated.

Sometimes we are taking into consideration the social vulnerability that most people that belong to these religious organizations, like Candomblé and Umbanda, how the kind of vulnerability, social vulnerability they are exposed to. That's why, for example, in the region that I have in my community, lots of the conflicts we have that have to do with some of those religious communities, they also have to do with the dispute for land rights. But as you can see, most of the disputes that involve land rights, they involve Indigenous, at least in Brazil, they involve Indigenous people and they involve Black people.

Either we are talking about those ethnic groups in Indigenous peoples, either we are talking about quilombolas, or we are talking about these traditional Black communities that we have in Brazil. So we have different companies and industries that keep expanding and buying the lands and putting the lands in their names, lands that have been occupied for centuries for those communities who live there. So we are talking about spiritual terrorism and religious racism in the sense that this kind of terror gets structured in the ways in which the relations, social relations, political relations, and cultural relations are established.

So sometimes when we talk, that's why I think that spiritual terrorism has more to do with the work I do here in Brazil, because many times it doesn't need your intention to do harm. It has to do with the ways in which things are structured and they facilitate that the harm goes in my direction.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 42:45

Absolutely. Absolutely. Yes. And I appreciate y'all adding religious racism to this bank of definitions and concepts that we're trying to help folks articulate, because when we see things like you were saying, Danielle, it's easier to be like, that's an isolated incident. And then y'all work on putting together a whole database and be like, this isn't a random one-off thing. But that religious racism, I think, is very connected to the white Christian supremacy, right? You have this entire structure and it's not just so happened that it goes in a particular way.

It's actually structured that way. Yeah. A thousand percent.

Dr. Gustavo Melo Cerqueira | 43:23

I think that's one of the things that we need also to pay attention, because we talk about religious racism and we are really sure about what we are talking about. And sometimes when we use that concept to be applied to different spaces, it gets a little bit twisted, which means that you need to research more and do more work on that. But the idea that we talk about religious racism is that we understand this as kind of one of the facets of what we call the structural racism.

OK. And we are talking more specifically about the anti-Black racism or sometimes also the anti-Indigenous people racism. But I think that we need to pay attention when we talk about Christian supremacy and even white Christian supremacy is that one thing that I like about the concepts and the way that they are developed is that we are talking about the white Christian supremacy logic, right? It doesn't mean that all people that will act within the white Christian supremacy logic, not always they are going to be white.

Lots of the violence we suffer from Neopentecostal Evangelicals, it comes from Black people. It is very common. So the case that I was telling about the hotel, it was a white woman. So that's different. But lots of the things that we suffer in terms of violence, it comes from Black people who work within the white Christian supremacy logic. So it's interesting to understand that sometimes it looks like Black on Black violence, but sometimes you need to understand that that violence is motivated by different political, ideological and cultural perspectives and also different political projects.

So Black on Black violence or anti-Black violence sometimes does not come from white bodies or brown bodies. Sometimes the anti-Black violence comes from a Black body that thinks that, that understands the logic that, well, if I am violent against a Black body, maybe it takes me, it drives me closer to be understood as a white body. We know it's not true, but some people just act this way, right? So I think that's also something interesting to point out, especially when we talk about the Brazilian context.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 45:52

I would love to connect, to like just draw a little dotted line also to those of us who are Latinos, Latinas or come from Latin American context, because we have colorism that we deal with, which has its whole own set of structures, but it's a very similar thing for those of us who were brought to the United States. And many of our families, for example, don't teach us Spanish or our indigenous languages that we come from, from Latin America, because the idea is if we can, especially for those of us who are not Black, like aren't phenotypically Black, because we are taught that as Latinos, Latinas or Hispanics, whatever, that if we assimilate enough, if we can get right up under the bosom of whiteness, that we are safer.

And so those kinds of survival strategies and mechanisms to not teach our children about the cultures that we come from, to not teach our children Spanish, to be in mostly predominantly white environments and including anti-immigrant kind of sentiment that is really intensifying in the US, in immigrant communities against other immigrant communities, sometimes of the same countries, but it is still based in a logic of white supremacy and still based in this idea of if we can act more like the oppressor, then maybe we'll be safer.

And so I want to recognize those survival strategies for those of us who carry a lot of shame or guilt as people who come from Latin American countries, parts of our families, but don't feel connected to those anymore, honoring that that was both a survival strategy, but now we can know better and understand better. And that requires us to do better because that anti-Black racism and sentiment that is like we try to distance ourselves from Blackness, those of us who have the possibility to move across that scale and see more white or less white, that feels like a battle for the souls of so many of our folks who are in this country right now in the US and throughout Latin America of trying to distance ourselves from indigeneity or trying to recover those, but we're still with all the privileges that we get because of our color.

So I think that that's a spiritual matter as much as it is a political matter and an identity matter. And I think it's a really important part of this conversation. So thank you for giving us that context. I think it's super relevant in lots of places. I'm always grateful when we have the opportunity to bring these conversations from around the globe together and back to the US. When we are struggling and when we face an oppressor that feels so much bigger than us, so overwhelming, it becomes really easy to defer to the idea that we are alone.

But conversations like this help remind us to look beyond that, our own experience, beyond political borders, beyond what we are experiencing in this exact moment and look to the others who have fought this fight before and who are still fighting alongside us. Gustavo's stories about Brazil are different from my stories in the US South, but in many important ways they are similar. We're both fighting white Christian supremacy. It's important that we are able to make these connections so that we can be together in solidarity, so that we can name the harm loudly and clearly and from there so that we can resist.

The problem is systemic and I am utterly convinced that the solution will be found only in community. There was already so much to learn and unpack from today's conversation and next week there will be so much more. Today we spent some time in Brazil. Join us in part two of this conversation where we learn more about the relevance of Haiti's colonial history and the Christian response to the earthquake there in 2010 and the ways white Christian supremacy intentionally

makes violence politically invisible by isolating incidents as personal rather than acknowledging that they are systemic.

Join us. Thank you for spending time with us today on this episode of Shameless Theology. I hope you found it both provocative and helpful on your own journey toward healing. These conversations are part of Soulforce's ongoing effort to name harm, honor our lived experiences, and imagine faith beyond violence. If you want to go deeper you can find a link to our new book called *Spiritual Violence Religious Phenomena That Defile the Faith* here in the show notes. You can also find more information on our website at soulforce.org where you can download free theological resources designed to support individuals, faith leaders, and communities who are navigating religious harm and spiritual reconstruction.

If something in today's dialogue resonated with you, maybe it stirred something and settled something or helped you find language for your own story, then you have found yourself in the right place. Consider sharing this episode with someone who might need it and follow along for future conversations and supplemental content. Whoever you are and wherever you find yourself in this time questioning, grieving, rebuilding, or reclaiming, I am so grateful that you are here. May your theological imagination remain ever alive and may you find spaces that honor your full blessed humanity.

With hearts ablaze and spirits unyielding, until next time, I'm Rev. Sex and this is Shameless Theology.